5 MIRACLES THAT STUNNED DOCTORS

Reader's digest

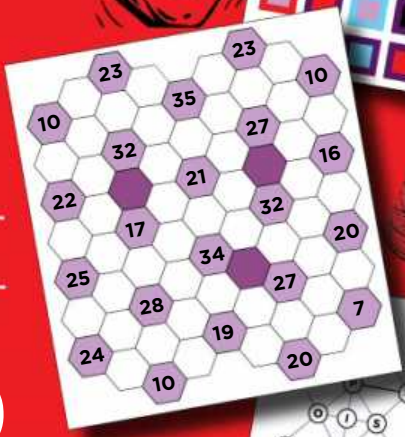
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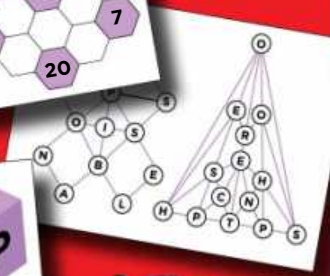


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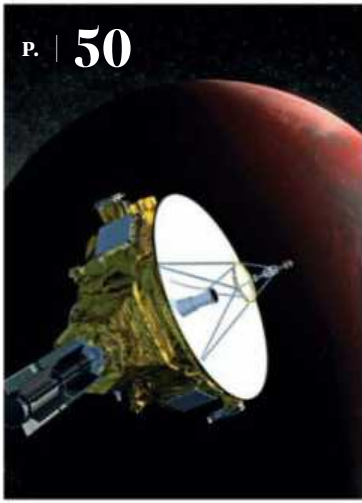
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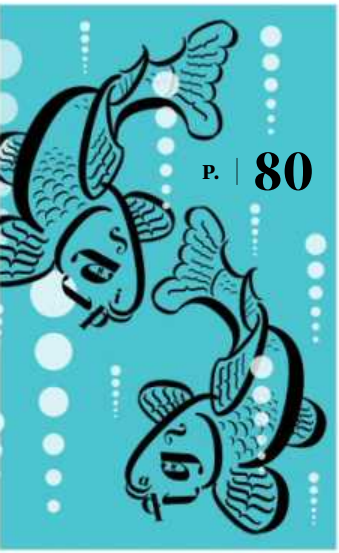
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Letters

READERS' COMMENTS AND OPINIONS

Escape to the City

I was enthralled by "Ian Rankin's Edinburgh" (August). It was hugely interesting to learn more about the Scottish capital – and the side of it that most people miss. A walkable city, I've always been told the best way to discover Edinburgh is to throw away your map and stumble across its hidden wynds (streets) and staircases.

It's a place I've always wanted to visit and for our 30th wedding anniversary this year, my husband and I have finally booked to go. We may take Ian's map!



CAROLINE MCCAULEY

Not Knots Per Hour

I enjoyed Robert Kiener's "Colossus of the Seas" (Subscriber Bonus, September), but was surprised Kiener wrote that the ship ran at "19 knots per hour". It makes no sense to add "per hour"to knots. The speed a ship travels is measured in nautical miles per hour, known simply as knots. So 19 knots is, indeed, 19 nautical miles per hour.

Sorry to be pedantic but we all should know about knots. The term originated, of course, when speed was measured by feeding out a cord which had knots in it – the number of knots feeding out in a set time giving the speed.

Anyway, an interesting article. What giants roam our seas!

RODERICK CUTHBERT

Long-Term Commitment

I started reading Reader's Digest as a kid. I think it's the best magazine out there. It is educational, humorous, challenging and

LET US KNOW

If you are moved – or provoked – by any item in the magazine, share your thoughts. See page 6 for how to join the discussion.

modern. I especially appreciate being privy to people's real-life anecdotes and learning vocabulary from the Word Power section every month. **DONNA THOMPSON**



CAPTION CONTEST

Come up with the funniest caption for the above photo and you could win cash. To enter, email editor@ readersdigest.com.au or see details on page 6.



Losing his Bearings

We asked you to think up a funny caption for this photo.

Goodbye, cruel world. I can bear it no longer! **LAURENCE OLIVER**

It's mating season and Bear Grylls has gone overboard trying to attract a mate. **CAROLYN JULLIENNE**

"Taxi!" **PAT HANSEN**

"Selfie with a grizzly, anyone?" **VALERY HUANG**

Congratulations to this month's winner, Pat Hansen.

What's the most daring thing you've ever done?

We asked readers to complete this sentence: "The most daring thing I've ever done ...". Here is a selection of their amazing and interesting answers.

... to say I love you to my dad after ten years of not speaking. Angela Hogan

... walk 30m on a narrow ice bridge connecting Zugspitze mountain (2962m) to another peak with sheer drops on either side. Leslie Keady

... move to China at the age of 55 to help those less fortunate. Diane Brittenden

... walk through crocodile-infested waters so the car following, with family on board, did not run off the causeway. Pip Condon

.... travel across the world to marry a man I'd never met before. Brigitte Heinig

... go up to a group of guys at a nightclub and stand up for a woman who was being harassed. Suarez Kasela

... hang off the wing strut of an old Cessna 2000 feet in the sky, then hope my parachute would open. Julie Allen

PHOTOS: iSTOCK

Reader's digest

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FOR DIGITAL EXTRAS AND SOCIAL MEDIA LINKS, SEE PAGE 62.

Anecdotes and jokes

Send in your real-life laugh for Life's Like That or All in a Day's Work. Got a joke? Send it in for Laughter is the Best Medicine!

Smart Animals

Share antics of unique pets or wildlife in up to 300 words.

Kindness of Strangers

Share your moments of generosity in 100–500 words.

My Story

Do you have an inspiring or life-changing tale to tell? Submissions must be true, unpublished, original and 800–1000 words – see website for more information.

Letters to the editor, caption competition and other reader submissions

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Editor's Note

Thanks for Sharing

WHAT'S THE MOST DARING THING YOU'VE EVER DONE? We posed that question to a group of readers recently and expected it to be entirely stories about adventure sports, thrill rides, foreign travel going awry, horror movie marathons… Not even near. Seems none of these pre-planned white-knuckle events measure up to the heart-pumping terrors that life throws at us, often with little notice. Turn to page 5 for a glimpse at the rawer side of readers' lives.

A common theme? Agreement that while nobody would have chosen their terrifying ordeal, there's a comforting pride and honour in getting through it intact and feeling all the stronger because of it.

We hope you enjoy our expanded puzzle section this issue, plus our bumper collection of quips, puns and Santa-styled jokes. They're corny enough for any bon bon and with the sparkle of a tinsel-topped angel.

From everyone here at Reader's Digest, here's wishing you and your family a lovely holiday, and much joy in the weeks to come. Until next time,



PHOTOGRAPHED BY DAMIAN BENNETT

STAFF PICK

What We Liked Best

Good reads that connected with us at RD this issue

From time to time a story crosses my desk that leaves me stunned. In "Grace Was Her Name" (page 58), Lorenzo Carcaterra gives an unforgettably raw account of the impact violence has on a family.

LOUISE WATERSON, managing editor

This year we've seen Pluto up close, confirmed water on Mars and found out what comets are really like to be on. Space exploration (Instant Answers: "Space Probes", page 66) continues to advance our knowledge of the universe and how we function within it. I can't wait to see what we learn next!

DONYALE HARRISON, chief subeditor and production editor

Reading the "Patron Saint of Introverts" (page 88), I really identify with a lot of those traits but I also recognise some extrovert in me. Luckily I have discovered the new buzz word: ambivert!

LUKE TEMBY, designer



ILLUSTRATION BY ANTHONY TREMMAGLIA

As a long-time sufferer of tinnitus, I found "Stop The Noise" (page 46) strangely reassuring, learning the endless high-pitched ringing in my ears is the daily woe of millions of others. Finding there are changes I can make which may alleviate the din gives me hope for some respite in the future.

JENNY BYRNE, subeditor

I was immensely relieved to read that Sandy's "misadventure" ended safely ("Survivor Dog", page 94). I completely empathise with Dave when he saw his beloved pet perched precariously on that ledge. This is also a reminder of the amazing work done by volunteers.

VICTORIA POLZOT, editorial coordinator

WIN $1000

100 WORD STORY WRITING COMPETITION

Our incredibly successful 100-word story competition is back. This is your chance to win US$1000 and see your work published by Reader's Digest – all you have to do is write a brilliant work of fiction in just 100 words.

Stories should be original, unpublished and exactly 100 words long (99-worders will be disqualified, hyphenated words count as one). Submit your entries by December 31, 2015.

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Goodwill comes in all shapes and forms. Dominic found 21 ways to change someone else's day for the better

The Three-Week Kindness Challenge

TARA CLARK is a 25-year-old registered nurse and a mother to three-year-old Everleigh. Her goal in life is to prove to her daughter that she can achieve anything if she sets her mind to it.

BY TARA CLARK

MY FRIEND DOMINIC recently set himself a 21-day kindness challenge. He started Mother's Day – May 10 – by surprising his mother at her work with his two brothers. He invited people to check his Facebook wall each day to see what "act of kindness" he had achieved with the hope that others would feel inspired to begin their own kindness challenge. His initial posts attracted over 100 Facebook likes, and gained more as the days went on.

The week before his challenge started, he had won some money, so on Day Two he donated some of his winnings to Wimmera UnitingCare, a local disability organisation in Horsham, Victoria. On Day Three he left money in an envelope at the laundromat with the words, "The next one is on me" scrawled on it. Later that day, the local district was hit by strong winds so he cleaned out his elderly neighbour's gutters on Day Four.



Dom manages a retirement village and on Day Five he visited some former residents who had moved to a nursing home, taking time to catch



up with them over a cup of coffee. Trading in his car keys for a bicycle helmet on Day Six was Dom's way of being kind to the environment, and then on Day Seven he took his grandmother on a road trip to three different towns so she could visit the graves of loved ones she hadn't visited in a while.

On Day Eight he spent the morning down at the nearby Wimmera River where he picked up rubbish that was littering the shore. He drove 200km to the closest blood bank in Ballarat to make his first blood donation on Day Nine and then on Day Ten bought a lottery ticket, and put it in an envelope with "Act Of Kindness" written on it before dropping it into the letterbox of a random house.

On Day Eleven my daughter and I found ourselves stuck in a supermarket car park with a flat battery. I called Dom, who came to our rescue with his jumper leads and smile, and successfully jump-started the car so we could get home.

Day Twelve's act of kindness was volunteering at Meals on Wheels to help deliver dinners to people in the community who need extra support.

And so Dom's kindness continued for another nine days – helping friends move house, delivering flowers to nurses at the local hospital, washing his aunt's car and stopping by his grandparents to help out in their garden are just some of the kind things he did. "I have loved every minute of this, had some terrific experiences and met some great people," he posted on the last day. "I encourage you all to step out of your comfort zone."

Dom took up this challenge because he had been through some difficult times after a relationship breakup. Instead of feeling sorry for himself, he turned a negative into a positive and I can honestly say that it has been contagious!



Share your story about a small act of kindness that made a huge impact. Turn to page 6 for details on how to contribute and earn cash.

PHOTOS: ISTOCK

Unbelievable

TRUE TALES TOLD TALL



Sense and Sensitivity

When did people become so stony-hearted? asks Nury Vittachi

A FRIEND watched the dinosaur movie *Jurassic World* IN FRONT OF HER PET BIRD so that the creature could remember when his kind ruled the earth. She was trying to be nice but I thought it was really insensitive.

The same friend told me that I was as "dumb as a box of rocks" while we walked past a rockery in a park.

"*Sssh*," I said. "They can hear you."

But of course there are no people on earth as insensitive as children.

Child: "Can we have a bee hive on the balcony?"

Me: "No. Mum's allergic to bee stings."

Child: "When she's dead can we have a bee hive on the balcony?"

Me: "I guess."

Now a question: if someone is two

ILLUSTRATION: ANDREW JOYNER

hours late for dinner and then complains that the food is overcooked, is it justifiable to dice him into cubes and lightly flash-fry him with herbs as an extra meat dish? I knew you'd say yes. I do this sort of thing a lot these days (identify acts of thoughtlessness, not flash-fry friends). Because it is clear that a massive epidemic of insensitivity is spreading around the world.

The most astonishing example is the funeral company that set up hundreds of fake gravestones bearing the names of (living) local residents in gold letters. Sales staff would show residents their names, saying: "Look! That could be you."

> ***The same friend told me that I was as "dumb as a box of rocks" while we walked past a rockery in a park***

Residents were unimpressed to the point of apoplexy. The hard-sell morticians at the China Dragon Garden graveyard in the Beijing suburbs were eventually persuaded that their venture, though creative, scored 8.9 on the Richter insensitivity scale. Especially in a community where omens are taken as scientifically verified proofs.

Doctor: "You have three months to live."

Patient: "Were my test results bad?"

Doctor: "Your test results were fine, but you picked Waiting Ticket 44 and sat in the Unlucky Chair. You're a goner."

If you think about it, most disputes are due to thoughtlessness. In the paper was a story about a bid by organisers of a UK vegetable growing contest to attract more entries by allowing people to enter vegies bought at the local supermarket. They never thought about the vegetable growers, who were outraged. A cynical colleague reading over my shoulder (GO AWAY) said that everyone had probably been entering supermarket vegetables for years anyway.

He maintained that people today were over-considerate, and offered an example. He and his sports-mad friends were recently discussing how they would like to vaporise the rival team and use their ashes as confetti as they danced on their graves singing their own team's anthem. When his wife complained that he was not being very nice, he thundered: "That type of political correctness is ruining this country."

Not sure that I agree with him, as I still think it's good to be thoughtful. On the afternoon before writing this, my bird-owning friend declined an offer of ice-cream because she said her teeth "were extremely sensitive these days".

I replied: "*Sssh*. They can hear you."

Nury Vittachi is a Hong Kong-based author. Read his blog at Mrjam.org

It was a small-town wedding reception, then the doors opened and the whole world turned up

The Wedding Crashers

BY BILL FORREST

Bill Forrest is a past Governor of Rotary. He was much involved in Rotary's Student Exchange programme, and is still an active member of the Tamworth West Rotary Club. He and wife Ruth have three sons and a daughter.

IT WAS A WARM SATURDAY EVENING back in May 1975 as the two coach loads of Rotary Student Exchange participants I was accompanying around Australia arrived in the north-west Queensland town of Julia Creek. We were on our way to Uluru (Ayers Rock), about 1900km away.

Our group had arranged to camp the night at the local football ground. As the coaches rumbled through the town, we noticed that wedding preparations were under way at a little church on the town's outskirts.

Sure enough, as we pulled into the football grounds, we could also see that the Shire Hall, about 100m from where we planned to camp, was being made ready for the reception. The 70 students were from 12 different countries and none of them had ever been to an Australian wedding – much less a reception.

Struck by an idea, I walked over to the hall and spoke to a lady who was busy setting up the tables. She turned out to be the groom's mother. I told her about my plan to offer some international flavour to the special event. With a little apprehension, she gave me the go-ahead and promised not to breathe a word to the guests or the bride and groom.



PHOTO: iSTOCK

Back at the campsite, I called the students together and outlined the plan. Around 50 eagerly jumped at the idea, and ran off to change into their national costumes, which they had worn on previous occasions during the exchange visit.

After the guests had arrived for the reception, we crept up alongside the hall under the cover of darkness and stopped at the entrance doors. The students represented 12 different countries – Japan, Korea, Singapore, Brazil, Germany, South Africa, USA, Philippines, Denmark, Sweden, Canada and Malaysia.

I opened the door to the hall a fraction. The groom's mother was waiting and watching, and gave me the nod. We then flung open the doors, marched in, and formed a circle around the three tables of wedding guests who were now sitting in stunned silence.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I announced. "Here are 50 exchange students from 12 countries. They have just arrived in Australia and they've never witnessed an Australian wedding. Would the bride and groom please stand and accept the students' greetings?"

Then each of the 12 groups of students approached the bridal couple and gave them a wedding

greeting traditional to their home country's custom. The girls kissed the groom and the boys reckoned it was OK to kiss the bride. The best man decided to get in on the act and proceeded to kiss everybody, too.

For the next hour or so each group of students then entertained the wedding party with songs and music from their own cultures. Two Korean girls sang "Arirang", a national folk song, and the Americans sang "Leaving on a Jet Plane".

After about an hour, the students departed in single file, accompanied by applause and cheering from the guests. The students were unanimous in telling me it was an experience they would never forget.

Shortly after breakfast the following morning, we boarded the coaches and made our way through the town before pulling into a petrol station to refuel.

"Are you the mob that crashed the wedding last night?" asked the attendant. "That was terrific! It's all over town!" So the students left Julia Creek very pleased with themselves.

Unfortunately, with all the excitement at the time I had forgotten to write down the names of the bride and groom. After trying to track them down through a few local churches without success, I decided to put the episode on the "back burner".

The story resurfaced in July 2001, when my wife and I set out on a caravanning holiday in Queensland. After 26 years I wrote to what I thought was the local newspaper. We made a point to revisit Julia Creek just in case we were able to find the end to our story. We pulled into the little town on a Saturday afternoon and the newsagent was the only shop open. I asked the proprietor if there was a newspaper printed in Julia Creek.

"Are you the mob that crashed the wedding last night?" asked the petrol station attendant. "That was terrific! It's all over town!"

"Are you the bloke who wrote about crashing the wedding?" he asked. "The bride you are looking for works here and she is very excited to meet you. She'll be here in the morning."

The next morning there were hugs all round and a hastily organised reunion for that evening with Kathy and Gordon Fels, the bride and groom, and his mother at the local club.

"My mates may have had bigger, fancier weddings than us, but none of them can boast of having guests from 12 countries!" Gordon told me.

Do you have a tale to tell? We'll pay cash for any original and unpublished story we print. See page 6 for details on how to contribute.

THE DIGEST

HEALTH

Should Adults Get the Whooping Cough Jab?

WHAT IS IT? Whooping cough is a severe, highly contagious infection of the respiratory tract caused by the *Bordetella pertussis* bacterium. While not usually life-threatening to adults, they are the main carriers of the infection and can unknowingly infect infants, who are very vulnerable. Immunisation against the bacterium can prevent the spread of infection.

HOW DOES IT SPREAD? The infection is spread through coughing and sneezing. It takes 7-10 days for a patient's first sign of illness to appear as a cough, runny nose and sore throat. The classical "whoop" coughing spasms appear 1-2 weeks later and take up to three months to ease. As early symptoms can easily be confused as a cold, infected adults may simply not realise they have it for weeks.

IS IT SERIOUS? According to 2008 WHO statistics, over 195,000 children die annually from the disease, most in developing countries. In developed countries, small babies are most at risk as they are too young to be vaccinated and are particularly vulnerable to the harsh cough.

SHOULD I BE VACCINATED? The most common vaccine used in developed countries offers 84% protection after three doses, with boosters given routinely to children. However, its effectiveness declines a decade after immunisation. Parents, grandparents, and people who work in close contact with babies and young children can increase protection for themselves and the children by getting a booster every ten years.

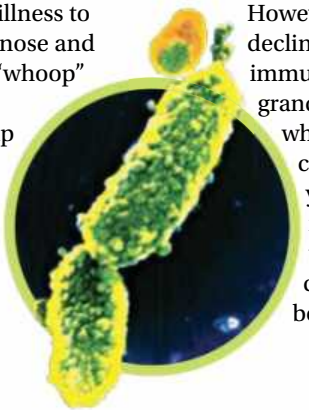


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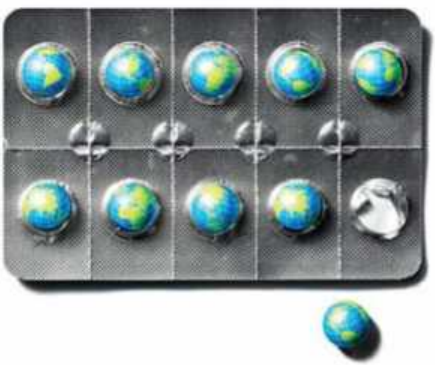
World of Medicine

More Work Time Means More Bar Time

Risky alcohol consumption is more likely among those who work long hours, according to a Finnish-led paper published in *The British Medical Journal*. This translates to upwards of 14 drinks a week for women or 21 drinks for men. Among the 330,000 study subjects from 14 countries, those who worked 48 hours a week or longer were more likely to be risky drinkers, a habit linked to health problems such as liver disease, cancer and mental illness.

Meditation Saves Brains

Yet another reason to get "omming": mediation may preserve grey matter. UCLA researchers mapped the brains of 50 people who meditate and 50 people who don't and found that while older subjects in both groups had less grey matter than younger ones, the regular meditators staved off some mental decline.



Stairs as a Diagnosis Tool

Does climbing a flight of stairs make you wince? Think about seeing a doctor now. Scientists from the University of Leeds were concerned that knee osteoarthritis sufferers usually only visit the doctor once the disease is well advanced and they're already in significant pain. So they followed 4700 people who already had or were at high risk of developing the condition over seven years. Using the stairs proved to be the most likely weight-bearing activity during which study subjects with osteoarthritis first noticed discomfort, followed by walking and then standing.

Mouth Exercise for Snoring

Have a snoring partner? A Brazilian study found that doing three months of mouth exercises like saying "A" for seven minutes thrice daily, cut people's rate of snoring by 36% and snoring volume by 59%.

PHOTO: ADAM VOORHES



Be Nice to Your Knees

BY SAMANTHA RIDEOUT

Knees are among our largest and most complex joints, but they're also some of the easiest to damage. Troublesome knees can leave you with chronic pain, more frequent injuries and, in extreme cases, a loss of mobility. Keeping those joints moving is vital. Here are three strategies that will help you maintain good knee mobility:

■ **Strengthen the muscles.** While the muscles surrounding the knee joint – the hamstrings and quadriceps – act like absorbers, the gluteal muscles also play an important role. The hamstrings sit behind the knee, the quadriceps are located in front of the thigh, and the gluteal muscles are a group of three muscles that make up the buttocks. "They basically steer, control and support the legs," explains Sammy Margo, a UK physiotherapist. Stair climbing is a great exercise that works all of these muscles at once. As well as being a low-impact activity, climbing stairs (or step-ups) helps cardiovascular fitness. It can also reveal how healthy your knees are – read more in our News From the World of Medicine.

■ **Footwear can be your knees' friend or foe** – depending on your choice. High heels will force the joints to endure approximately 25% more pressure compared to going barefoot. When buying shoes, look for cushioning and a good fit. Consider your foot shape – people with high arches might want extra padding to compensate for a lack of natural shock absorption.

■ **Low impact exercises**. If your knees have already suffered some wear and tear from injury or arthritis, you might benefit from including some regular low-impact exercises for your fitness. Swimming and cycling are great, as is Nordic walking – the trekking poles offer extra support.

PHOTO: MASTERFILE



6 Tips for Healthy, White Teeth

Try these tips for keeping your pearlies white

1 Go on a white-teeth diet. If you're quaffing red wine and black tea, or smoking cigarettes, expect the results to show up as not-so-pearly whites. Other culprits include colas, gravy, soya sauce and dark juice.

2 Chuck away your toothbrush or electric toothbrush head every two to three months. Otherwise, you're just transferring bacteria to your mouth. According to dentist Harold Katz, the best way to brush is by placing your toothbrush at a 45-degree angle against your gums and gently moving it in a circular motion. Grip the toothbrush like a pencil so you won't scrub too hard.

3 Use a tongue scraper every morning to remove tongue plaque and freshen breath. One cause of bad breath is the build-up of bacteria on the tongue, which a daily tongue scraping will help banish. It's more effective than brushing your tongue with a toothbrush too, says Katz.

4 Eat "detergent" foods that are firm or crisp to help clean teeth as you munch. Apples are good, as are raw carrots, celery and popcorn. For best results, make "detergent" foods the final food you eat in your meal if you know you won't be able to brush your teeth after eating.

5 Stay fresh. Check by licking your palm and smelling it while it's wet. If you smell something, it's time for a sugar-free breath mint. Shopping for mouthwash? Make sure it's alcohol-free. Mouthwashes with too much alcohol can dry out mouth tissue, making it more prone to bacteria.

6 Brushing your teeth first and last thing are the two most crucial times of the day, as saliva which keeps plaque off teeth, dries up at night, so it's best to have all plaque cleaned off the teeth before sleep. It's also important to brush first thing in the morning to remove plaque and bacteria built up as you slept.

PHOTOS: iSTOCK

Natural Homemade Dandruff Treatments

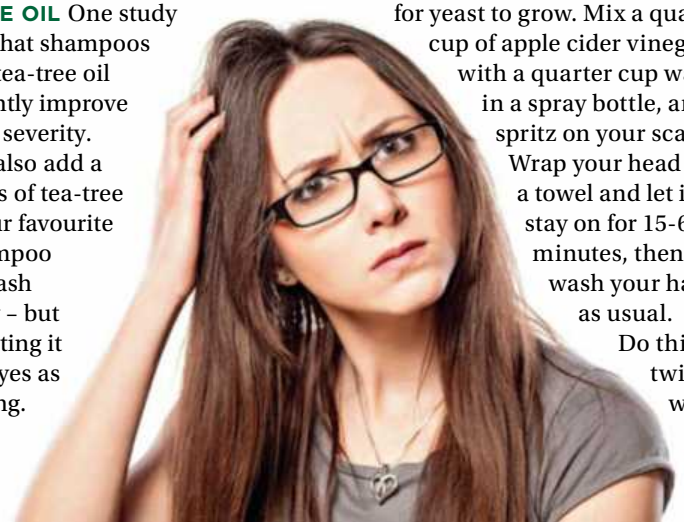
Try these simple treatments to help soothe your scalp and banish those pesky flakes

Dandruff is more than one simple problem. It may be the result of a dry scalp, or a skin condition called seborrhoeic dermatitis. It could also be caused by eczema, psoriasis, or, very commonly, an overgrowth of a yeast-like fungus called malassezia. Over-the-counter remedies include shampoos with zinc pyrithione, which targets fungus and bacteria; coal tar and selenium sulphide, which slow the growth and die-off of skin cells on your scalp; and salicylic acid, which loosens flakes so they can be washed away. For more natural treatments, read on.

TEA-TREE OIL One study showed that shampoos with 5% tea-tree oil significantly improve dandruff severity. You can also add a few drops of tea-tree oil to your favourite hair shampoo as you wash normally – but avoid getting it in your eyes as it can sting.

BICARBONATE OF SODA
Overactive fungi can cause dandruff. Wet your hair and then rub a handful of bicarb vigorously into your scalp. Skip the shampoo and go right to rinsing. Because bicarb is an alkaline, it may bring the pH balance of the scalp to a healthy equilibrium. Your hair may feel dried out at first, but after a few weeks your scalp will start producing natural oils, leaving your hair softer and flake-free.

APPLE CIDER VINEGAR The acidity of apple cider vinegar changes the pH of your scalp, making it harder for yeast to grow. Mix a quarter cup of apple cider vinegar with a quarter cup water in a spray bottle, and spritz on your scalp. Wrap your head in a towel and let it stay on for 15-60 minutes, then wash your hair as usual. Do this twice a week.



What Do Skinny People Eat?

Surprise: it's not all carrots and celery sticks

OATS Eating high-fibre porridge in the morning can help kick-start your metabolism and keep you full until lunch. One study found that people who ate fewer than six grams of dietary fibre a day gained around 3.5kg more than those who consumed at least 11g daily, over a ten-year period. (A bowl of porridge topped with one small banana and a handful of sliced almonds provides about 11g of dietary fibre.)



AVOCADO If you think avocado is too fatty to be a weight-loss food, a study published in *Nutrition Journal* found that people who ate half an avocado at lunch reported feeling full longer and had less desire to eat more afterwards, compared to those who skipped out on the fruit. The healthy mono-unsaturated fats help keep blood sugar levels stable, which is key to fighting hunger.



CHILLI PEPPERS Scientists from Purdue University in the US found that people who added cayenne red pepper to meals reported fewer cravings for fatty, salty, and sweet foods.



GREEN TEA One Japanese study found that people who drank the equivalent of five cups of green tea a day lost significantly more weight, especially belly fat, than those who only drank about one cup, thanks to the high level of catechins. These compounds are thought to increase the amount of energy your body uses, helping you lose excess body fat.



NUTS A *New England Journal of Medicine* study found that regular nut eaters were more slender than those who didn't eat nuts. High in protein and fibre, nuts fill you up and help to ward off hunger. Almonds and pistachios are among the lowest in kilojoules and fat.

PHOTOS: ISTOCK

Life on the Sunny Side

Savvy ways to avoid wasting those leftover egg yolks

What to do with spare egg yolks? They have plenty of uses - but if you don't plan to use your leftover egg yolks right away, they don't freeze well and can dry out after a day in the fridge. Mix the yolk with a bit of water (you can keep the yolks whole in the water if you carefully remove them whole when ready to use), and put into a covered container in the fridge. This way, they'll keep for two to three days. Here are some smart ideas:

■ Power up a smoothie. Eggs add protein, omega-3s and other nutrients as they thicken smoothies and shakes with a creamy texture. Blogger Cara Comini adds two to three egg yolks to her fruit milkshake recipes to make "the smoothie taste like real ice-cream".

■ Indulge in Alfredo sauce. This classic Italian dish isn't viewed as the healthiest, but it's fine to enjoy on special occasions. A cheesy, creamy Fettuccine Alfredo (recipe on Italianchef.com) will use up two leftover egg yolks.

■ Top dishes with Hollandaise sauce. You've probably had this rich, thick yellow sauce over Eggs Benedict at brunch, but it's versatile enough to use in other dishes. Drizzle homemade Hollandaise over steamed asparagus, or spoon some on top of grilled salmon.

■ Egg yolks can also be used as "food" for your skin and hair. They make a wonderful skin-mask ingredient because their vitamin A may help repair skin and reduce acne. Your mask can moisturise if you add almond oil, avocado and clay, or tone if you add witch hazel.

■ To moisturise your hair, beat 6-7 yolks until creamy, and apply to clean, damp hair. Let the mixture sit for 20 minutes, then rinse with cool water. You can use this deep conditioning treatment about once a month.



7 Secrets to Make Your Relationship Last

Here's how to maintain a happy, strong partnership

BY SARÌ HARRAR AND DR RITA DEMARIA



BE VOCAL ABOUT THINGS YOU LIKE Boredom, frustration and everyday irritations can douse the spark between you and your partner – and more of the same certainly won't feed the flame. Making the good stuff your top priority will. Here's how to do it: first, consider that it takes up to 20 positive statements to outweigh the harm done by one negative one. So compliment your girlfriend on her new shoes, or your boyfriend on his new blue shirt. Thank him for helping around the house. Phone her office for a quick "thinking of you" check-in. Be sure these compliments and thank yous are heartfelt and specific, and make eye contact when you smile.

TOUCH EACH OTHER Human touch aids the release of feel-good endorphins, for giver and receiver. So hold hands when you're walking with your partner and revive the ways you touched in the early days. Make a commitment to spend up to 30 minutes a day chatting with each other about everyday plans, goals and, yes, dreams. This is time to build a friendship. Studies show that being friends pays off over time, ensuring a closer, more intimate union.

PHOTO: ISTOCK

STOP BLAMING YOUR PARTNER FOR EVERYTHING THAT'S WRONG
It's tempting to blame your partner when you feel angry, disappointed, bored, betrayed or stressed out about your relationship. The next (wrong) step is seeing your mate as the one who must change for the relationship to improve. That's a cop-out. Trying to improve your partner puts him or her on the defensive and casts you in a negative light. The result? Nobody takes responsibility.

The true fix: change yourself. When you address your own flaws and seek the best in your companion, magic happens. Optimism increases. Your partner feels better because he or she feels appreciated, not chastised. And you both feel motivated to change in ways that lead to even more joy.

IMPROVE YOUR RELATIONSHIP BY RELAXING The happier you feel, the happier your relationship will be, and the easier it will be to manage conflicts. If 15 minutes of morning yoga, a switch to decaf, or a new hobby help you relax, the good feelings can't help but lead to happier, richer moments together.

FIGHT FAIR Conflict is a normal, even healthy, part of any relationship. What's important is how you handle it. In a US study of long-time couples, joint problem-solving ability was cited as a key factor for 70% of satisfied pairs.

First, steer clear of criticism, confrontation and hostility. Avoid verbalising critical thoughts, keep discussions from escalating, and don't use absolutes like "never" and "always". If a fight does start, try to change the subject, inject gentle humour, empathise or show your partner extra appreciation. Too late? Call a truce, walk away and cool off for a while.

PICK THE RIGHT TIME TO ARGUE
Don't start tough talks if you're not well rested and well fed. Hunger and fatigue can unleash nasty remarks and dark thoughts.

Don't ever try to deal with serious marital issues if you've got one eye on something else. Turn off the TV, the phone, the laptop. If you're distracted or going out the door, pick another time to talk. You can't resolve conflicts on the fly.

LEARN TO LISTEN Speak less and listen more. Blame, criticism and bullying predict a bad end, or at least a living hell. When talk turns combative, don't interrupt, offer a solution or defend yourself too soon. Nod, re-phrase or provide a soft "um-hum" to show you honour the emotions behind the words.





The well-appointed lounge of South Africa's Blue Train

All Aboard! Five Long (and Iconic) Train Trips

We track down some of the greatest rail journeys

THE ORIGINAL TRANS-SIBERIAN EXPRESS

Spanning 9288km of track, this is perhaps the most iconic of rail journeys and the longest passenger train route in the world. With an average speed of just 77km/h, the trip from Moscow to Vladivostok isn't for those on a tight schedule – you'll need to set aside a minimum 146 hours, 8 minutes (six and a bit days), and most journeys include stopovers. But for that investment you'll cross multiple time zones and witness the breadth of Russia's majestic terrain, from verdant woodlands, through mountains and desert, to grassy steppe. While itineraries vary, most journeys break at Irkutsk, one of the largest cities in Siberia, with ornately decorated 19th century buildings, just 70km from World Heritage-listed Lake Baikal.

THE CANADIAN

The trip from Toronto to Vancouver is a sleepy 83 hours long – but considering you'll be winding through the steep and snow-capped Rocky Mountains and Canadian Shield forests, the pace suits anyone looking for relaxation, rest and peaceful views. Huge glass windows make the most of the scenery as the train wends its way across 4466km of Canada's diverse landscape.

THE BLUE TRAIN

South Africa's famous Blue Train spans 1600km of track linking Pretoria with Cape Town. More like a hotel

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES; ISTOCK

on rails than a train, there are lounge carriages where passengers can mingle in comfort and some suites contain full-sized baths. High-tech additions like the driver's eye camera view meet classic decor and a butler service. The journey takes 27 hours from start to finish and crosses some of the most diverse and picturesque scenery on the African continent. Don't expect to feel the rush of wind through your hair though, as its average speed is just 57km/h.

THE INDIAN PACIFIC

Departing from Sydney, it takes about 70 hours for the Indian Pacific to traverse the Australian continent on its way to Perth. Stopping at the mining town of Broken Hill, Adelaide, and Kalgoorlie you'll cover 4352km at an average speed of 85km/h. At that rate, you'll catch the full glory of the sun setting across the horizon on the longest stretch of straight rail track in the world. Travel in spring for the best of Western Australia's wildflowers.

JINGHU HIGH SPEED RAIL

For those who like their train travel to evoke the future rather than the past, China is calling. The showcase of China's modern rail fleet was launched in 2012 and shaves 20 hours off the 1303km trip from Beijing to Shanghai, delivering passengers to their destination in five super-fast hours. It is currently the fastest long-distance passenger train in the world, reaching speeds of 300km/h.



TRAIN FACTS

Fastest passenger train The MagLev Chou Shinkanzen – a Japanese magnetic levitation train – broke the world speed record for a passenger train back in April. During a test run near Mt Fuji, this new breed of bullet train reached an incredible speed of 603km/h. The planned top speed in operation is 505km/h and it will ultimately connect Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka, with the first stage opening in 2027.

Longest train journey The China-Europe Block Train travels 9977km from Yiwu to Madrid over 21 days. But train buffs who have made the Trans Siberian trip needn't feel miffed, as this is a decidedly unglamorous freight service designed to cut up to two weeks off the sea freight time between the two cities.

Longest and heaviest train Australian-based BHP Billiton intentionally set the record in 2001 over a 275km distance in Western Australia. The 7.35km-long train comprised 683 freight cars carrying iron ore and eight locomotives, distributed along its length. The total weight of the train was 99,735 tonnes.

The Most Visited Cities in the World

Asian cities dominate the list, but London is most popular

Whether you want to follow the crowds or know where to avoid them, each year the MasterCard Global Destinations Cities Index highlights the places around the world that are projected to have the most visitors. Here are its top ten ranked cities for visitor arrivals in 2015.

1. **London** – 18.82 million
2. **Bangkok** – 18.24 million
3. **Paris** – 16.06 million visitors
4. **Dubai** – 14.26 million visitors
5. **Istanbul** – 12.56 million visitors
6. **New York** – 12.27 million visitors
7. **Singapore** – 11.88 million visitors
8. **Kuala Lumpur** – 11.12 million visitors
9. **Seoul** – 10.35 million visitors
10. **Hong Kong** – 8.66 million visitors

$ The top three cities for visitor spending are London (US$20.2billion), New York (US$17.4billion) and Paris (US$16.6billion).



PHOTOS: ISTOCK

Eight Things You Probably Didn't Know About Barbie

The Mattel corporation claims, somewhere in the world, there is one Barbie doll sold every three seconds. (Hey – there goes another one!) Here are some little-known facts about America's plastic sweetheart.

1. HER FAME IS GLOBAL, BUT SHE'S A SMALL TOWN GIRL. According to brand lore, Barbara "Barbie" Millicent Roberts was officially born on March 9, 1959, in the fictional town of Willows, Wisconsin.

2. SHE'S JUST ONE OF SEVEN KIDS. Over the years, her siblings for sale have included: Skipper, Stacie, Chelsea, Krissy, Tutti and Todd.

3. BARBIE DIGS YOUNGER MEN. Her longtime BF Ken is two years younger than Barbie, debuting in toy stores in 1961.

4. SHE HAS HAD MORE THAN 150 CAREERS, including paleontologist, Canadian Mountie, McDonald's cashier, Desert Storm medic, business executive, secretary, Catwoman, and, regrettably, rapper.

5. SHE'S BEEN TO SPACE THREE TIMES. Astronaut Barbie debuted in space in 1965 (four years before the moon landing), then returned in 1986 and 1994.



6. HER HOUSE IS A ZOO. Barbie has owned more than 40 pets, including 21 dogs, 14 horses, three ponies, six cats, a parrot, a chimpanzee, a panda, a lion cub, a giraffe, and a zebra.

7. SHE'S GOT FRIENDS IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY. Gucci, Versace, Vera Wang, Dolce & Gabbana, and Givenchy have all contributed designs to Barbie's wardrobe.

8. HER WARDROBE IS HOUSE-SIZED. Barbie has had more than one billion outfits (with shoes to match) designed for her.



Cradling four-month-old Taily, Ruby is grateful to return to her family

Most people don't survive a dying heart or a brain-eating amoeba. These five were extraordinarily lucky

Miracles That Stunned Doctors

BY GRETCHEN VOSS

She Was "Dead" for 45 Minutes

They literally ran her back to the operating room.

Forty-year-old Ruby Graupera-Cassimiro had just had a completely normal C-section, giving birth to a beautiful baby girl on September 23 last year. But when her medical team moved her to the recovery room, she fell unconscious. Suddenly, Ruby – now a mother of two – was in full cardiac arrest.

Dr Jordan Knurr, her anaesthesiologist at Boca Raton Regional Hospital in Florida, US, immediately intubated Ruby so a machine could breathe for her. He called a code, and about a dozen other doctors and nurses crowded into the room, frantically giving advanced cardiac life support. "For more than two hours, she was having life-threatening heartbeats," Dr Knurr says. Most scary was when Ruby had a pulseless rhythm – her heart was beating but not pumping any blood throughout her body – and doctors delivered constant CPR compressions for 45 minutes straight to try to get her heart working normally again.

After about two hours, her

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMANDA FRIEDMAN

doctors knew there was no hope. They brought her extended family into the room to say goodbye. After Ruby's family returned to the waiting room, where they, along with a few nurses, frantically prayed on their knees for a different outcome, the doctors stopped pumping her chest. They were ready to call her time of death.

"I was seconds away from turning off the ventilation machine when one of the nurses shouted, 'Stop!'" Dr Knurr says. "Without any medicine or CPR, Ruby's heart began to beat on its own for the first time in two hours. It is just indescribable."

It turned out that some amniotic fluid had leaked into the uterus and travelled through Ruby's bloodstream and to her heart. Called an amniotic fluid embolism, it causes an air block in the heart and prevents blood from flowing. "These embolisms are rare, and we don't know a lot about them," Dr Knurr says. "Usually the patient passes away or has significant brain damage." (Her doctors don't know what happened to the amniotic debris; they assume it dissolved on its own.)

Not only did Ruby live, but "she is in perfect health. It's almost as if this never happened," says Dr Knurr. "It's a miracle. I'm not a highly religious person, but you just don't see this happen." The next morning, Ruby's breathing tube was removed. Four days later, she walked out of the hospital with her newborn daughter, Taily – without even a broken rib from all the chest compressions.

"Someone else was running the show that day; there's no doubt in my mind," Ruby says today. "I don't know why God chose me, but I know he gave me this life again for a reason."

The Heart That Healed Itself

He had been throwing up for four days. But clearly, this was not a mere stomach bug.

On August 17, 2012, 23-year-old Michael Crowe "froze up" – eyes open and staring into space – on the couch. He quickly snapped to, but when it happened again a few minutes later, his mother rushed him to the local emergency room.

There they learned that Michael was in real trouble. His heart was pumping out blood at just 25%, an alarmingly low rate. By the time he was transferred to Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha an hour later, it was down to 10%. A virus was causing acute myocarditis, inflammation of the heart muscle. If it got worse, he would need a heart transplant. With Michael's family surrounding his bed, the doctors asked him to sign papers – while he still could – for that transplant. "They said I had only a 30 per cent chance that my heart would recover," Michael says. "I remember thinking, I can take those odds. I

haven't won the lottery yet, I'm Irish, I'm due for some luck. I was strangely calm."

His doctors, however, were not. "His heart failure was so bad," says his cardiologist, Dr Eugenia Raichlin. "The rate of mortality is huge." They immediately hooked him up to an ECMO, an external heart and lung machine, to pump his blood while his heart couldn't. But it was a short-term fix, and Michael's health continued to decline. Spiking fevers led to convulsions; ice cooled him but dropped his oxygen levels. "It was a balancing game just to keep me stable," Michael says.

He desperately needed a heart transplant.

For 17 days they waited, while Michael's condition continued to worsen. His heart stopped twice – once for an entire day (being hooked up to the ECMO machine prevented him from dying). Doctors had to fend off blood clots and excess bleeding.

At 6.30am on September 3, his doctors got the phone call everyone had been waiting for: a heart would be available that night. But a few hours later, they made a devastating discovery. Michael had developed a blood infection; a transplant would be too dangerous.

As Michael's family despaired, Dr Raichlin noticed something unusual: His blood pressure, which should have remained constant because of the heart-lung machine, was actually rising. She ordered a test, which revealed that the left side of his heart was working at near-normal capacity. Unbelieving, she ordered another. Again, the same astounding results.

After four days hooked up to a different machine that assisted only the right side of his heart, Michael no longer needed a transplant. His heart had completely, miraculously healed itself, his body eradicating the virus on its own. "He overcame everything," Dr Raichlin says. "He was very debilitated, but he rebuilt himself."

Many patients with Michael's condition die, or get a heart transplant, or survive but have permanent heart tissue damage. But today, as Michael works through his third year of pharmacy school, his heart is in perfect shape. "I'm so grateful that I got a second chance at life," he says.

Battling a Deadly Brain-Eating Amoeba

Fight like a girl. That's what 12-year-old Kali Hardig's parents told her on Friday, July 19, 2013.

There was nothing else to say. It was impossible to believe that just the day before her crushing headache and relentless nausea started, Kali and two pals had been giddily playing king of the hill at a water park near Benton, Arkansas. It was there, doctors told the devastated parents, that Kali must have gotten water infected

with a brain-eating amoeba up her nose. The creature then travelled along her olfactory nerve and into her brain, where it began feasting on her brain tissue – a condition called primary amoebic meningoencephalitis. The doctors said it was about 99% fatal – only two people in North America had ever survived. "We had to tell her parents that it was very likely she would not be alive in 48 hours," says Dr Matt Linam, the infectious disease specialist who treated her.

Still, doctors at Arkansas Children's Hospital jumped into action, pumping Kali's body full of antifungals and antibiotics as well as a rare, unapproved German drug they got from the Centers for Disease Control; lowering her body's temperature to 33°C and putting her in a medically induced coma in an attempt to reduce brain swelling; and hooking her up to a ventilator, then a dialysis machine for her failed kidneys. For two weeks, Kali's medical team worked around the clock just trying to keep her alive – a complex balance of preventing low blood pressure and stopping episodes of high blood pressure that worsened brain swelling.

"We had good hours and bad hours, not days," says Dr Linam. Slowly Kali's brain swelling stabilised. Doctors decreased her sedation and increased her body temperature, unsure if she would be the same little girl when – or if – she woke up. "We just didn't know," Dr Linam says, "but two days later, she did a thumbs-up, and her parents knew she was still in there."

Kali would be in the hospital for eight weeks, relearning the most basic of functions, like swallowing. But eventually she officially became survivor number three. Kali is now a healthy, normal teenager.

Doctors don't know exactly why she lived. (A 12-year-old Florida boy, diagnosed days after Kali, received the same German medicine but didn't survive.) "Number one, it was God's grace," Dr Linam says. "Other than that, it was countless little things that went her way, countless little miracles that happened every day and made the difference between life and death."

The Role of a Lifetime

The silent killer. That's what doctors call an abdominal aortic aneurysm (AAA).

The extremely dangerous condition – in which the main blood vessel shuttling blood to the abdomen, pelvis, and legs enlarges – can balloon up for years without any symptoms. But if the aneurysm bursts, it is often fatal.

Pretending to have this silent killer was Jim Malloy's assignment as a "medical actor" one day in February 2013. Over the years, Jim, then a 75-year-old retired engineer, had faked all manner of medical maladies so that students at the University of Virginia School of Medicine could

practice diagnosing him. Really, it was just a fun part-time retirement job.

When Ryan Jones, a third-year medical student, walked into the room, Jim followed his script for an AAA: He complained of light-headedness and stomach pain. But when Ryan pushed down on the centre of Jim's abdomen, he was shocked to feel a pulsing mass – it appeared to be an actual aneurysm.

"I stepped quickly back, confused," Ryan says. "I tried to get Mr Malloy to break character and tell me that he knew he had an aneurysm. But he wouldn't."



Examining an actor playing a patient, Ryan Jones didn't expect to save Jim Malloy's life

Ryan's attending doctor told Jim that he should see a cardiologist, but it was hard for Jim to take seriously. "I didn't think I had any symptoms," Jim says. He felt totally fine, and he had gotten a clean bill of health from his primary care doctor two weeks earlier.

When he did get an ultrasound, it showed that his AAA measured 6cm – with the potential to rupture. Doctors immediately scheduled surgery and inserted a stent to deflate the aneurysm, saving his life. "I had no idea anything was going on, and I would have just gone about my business," Jim says. "I'd probably be dead."

Ryan, who will start his residency in radiation oncology this year, agrees. "It was an amazing coincidence that he was volunteering for that case. If he had been pretending to have anything else, I wouldn't have done that part of the exam, and I wouldn't have found it," Ryan says. "He was in the right place at the right time."

Perhaps no-one is more aware of this lifesaving good fortune than Jim's wife, Louise. "Soon after Jim's surgery, I met two women whose husbands

bled out and died from an AAA," she says. "We are so grateful to Ryan."

The Church That Cured Cancer

It's hard to say which was in worse shape: the run-down century-old church or the cancer-ridden 56-year-old man perched on its crumbling steps.

For years, Greg Thomas would sit on those very steps and pray when he walked his dogs along the country lanes in rural Minnesota. But in May 2009, he learned that the searing headaches, earaches and jaw aches that had plagued him for the past year were due to inoperable head and neck cancer. It had progressed so far that the doctors told Greg's family to start planning his funeral.

"I was sitting at the church one evening, pouring my heart out to God," Greg says. "I kept looking at the building and the shape it was in. I said, 'Before I leave this earth, Lord, I'd like to do something for you.'"

Greg decided that that something was to fix the peeling paint and the leaking roof, the mangled steps and the rotting floorboards. He approached the church's association with a deal: he would completely repair the building on one condition: "That I get a key to the front door so I can go in anytime I want to worship." He warned that it would be slow going – he had just gone through three rounds of chemotherapy along with 40 sessions of radiation and had lost 29kg. They said yes anyway.

Incredibly, as Greg scraped paint and replaced boards, he felt himself growing stronger every day. The more he worked on the church, the better he felt – he didn't even need the strong prescription pain medication his doctor had prescribed. "My oncologist was blown away," Greg says. "She said, 'Whatever you're doing, keep on doing it.'"

As Greg continued to renovate the church, medical scans revealed some startling news: his tumours were shrinking. Four years and 23 days after Greg's diagnosis, his doctors were able to remove his feeding tube – the one they'd said he would have for the rest of his life – and he ate solid food again. Today, Greg's tumours are gone. He is considered officially in remission and no longer needs follow-up tests.

And the church? After five years of Greg's labour and love, it has been restored to its former glory too. Greg has finished his main project, but he will probably always be involved in maintaining its beauty (he still wants to replace some windows, for example). Greg held his third-annual open house there last Christmas, inviting the entire community. "While I was restoring the church," Greg says, "God was restoring me." R

Do you have any stories about medical miracles? Write to us, details on page 6.



Santa Claus is coming to town – and he's bringing a grab bag of Christmas jokes to make your spirits bright

...and to all a Good Laugh



BY ANDY SIMMONS





THE HOLIDAY SEASON officially starts on the last Friday of November, when the first shopper is trampled in a rush for this year's must-have gift. But the holidays really began last December 26, when every disappointed child formulated a ~~demands~~ wish list in preparation for the next haul.

ILLUSTRATIONS: NISHANT CHOKSI

For example, one seven-year-old girl wrote this list, to which her dad added his thoughts.

- **"Black, light blue, green, purple, and pink North Faces."** Five North Face jackets at 100 bucks each? Dream smaller. That is apparel meant for serious outdoorsmen who dangle from belayed ropes on the south face of K2. The outdoorsiest we get is when we roll down the window at the drive-through.
- **"A new radio."** Done. I'll throw in my old Betamax collection as a stocking stuffer.
- **"$1000."** You want cash? Clear the spiders out of the attic. I'll give you three bucks for it.
- **"A light-up Razor scooter that is the colour blue."** "Dad, for Christmas, can I get hit by a car?"
- **"A new canape that glows up."** So, like, a glowing miniature crab cake with a toothpick in it? I could maybe do that.
- **"A pet puppy border collie with a peace sign coller and a leash."** Do you see any borders in this house that need patrolling, apart from the bathroom door when Daddy is having his alone time? No.
- **"A black rist bange."** I don't know what this is, but done.

DREW MAGARY, from deadspin.com

Of course, gift giving may not be everyone's strong suit.

One year, my father gave Mom a DVD. In itself it wasn't a bad gift, except a) it was a rental, and b) we didn't own a DVD player.

AMY MARSHALL HODGES

Santa's a pro, which is why kids bypass parents and appeal to him:

- "Dear Santa, Please text my dad. He has my whole list."
- "Dear Santa, Sorry for what I did in the past, and thank you for the Christmas letter. I love it. But what I want for Christmas is $53 billion."
- "Dear Santa, How are you? I'm good. Here is what I want for Christmas: http://www.amazon.com/dp/B0032HF60M/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1410271945&sr=8-1"

Sources: wgna.com and someecards.com



What happens when kids' letters arrive at the North Pole? Do Kringle and Co. sell the data to online marketers? We read the fine print on Santa's website:

Santa's Privacy Policy: At Santa's Workshop, your privacy is important to us. What follows is an explanation of how we collect and safeguard your personal information.

- **Why Do We Need This Information?** Santa Claus requires your information in order to compile his annual list of who is Naughty and who is Nice and to ensure accuracy when he checks it twice.
- **What Information Do We Collect?** We obtain information from the unsolicited letters sent to Santa by children all over the world listing specific items they would like to receive for Christmas. Often these letters convey additional information, such as which of their siblings are doodyheads. The letters also provide another important piece of information – fingerprints. We run these through databases maintained by the FBI, CIA, NSA, Interpol, MI6 and the Mossad. If we find a match, it goes straight on the Naughty List.
- **What Do We Do with the Information We Collect?** Sharing is one of the joys of Christmas. For this reason, we share your personal information with unaffiliated third parties: the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, and Hanukkah Harry.

LAURENCE HUGHES,
from McSweeney's Internet Tendency

It's time for the Christmas light competitions: neighbour against neighbour, suburb against suburb: My daughter and I took the long route through the neighbourhood to admire the Christmas decorations. One front yard contained a trove of lights, ornaments, elves, carollers, trimmings ... in short, it was a mess. My daughter summed it up perfectly when she announced, "It looks like Christmas threw up."

CECILLE HANSEN

Do you hear what I hear? That's right; music is filling the



air! Have you downloaded the latest holiday album? It had them dancing in the streets of Bethlehem centuries ago!

The Little Drummer Boy's Greatest Hits: Includes the songs "Pum Pum Pum Pum," "Rum Pum Pum," "Ba Rum Pum Pum," "Rum Pum Pum Ba Rum Pum Pum," and special bonus track "Pum Pum Pum, Ba Rum Pum Pum." Source: someecards.com

Hope you like schmaltzy, sentimental holiday movies because that's what will be playing on TV night and day for the entire month. In case you've forgotten any of these films you've seen only 47 times, some brief reviews:

- ***How the Grinch Stole Christmas*:** "Crimes against Who-manity"
- ***A Christmas Carol*:** "Bob, Marley"
- ***Elf*:** "A Christmas Ferrell"
- ***It's a Wonderful Life*:** "Technically, Stewart's a zombie"
- ***The Santa Clause*:** "Killer gets community service" Source: fwfr.com

Next, the tree. Note: The real trick isn't picking the right pine. It's getting it inside your home. But with our 15-point plan, you'll be trimming in no time.

1) Cut the cords that bind the tree to the roof of your car. Allow them to snap back and strike you in the eye.
2) Curse.
3) Slowly pull the tree toward you.
4) Wobble under its weight for a few seconds, then fall down.
5) Curse.
6) Stand up and notice the fresh scratches on the roof of your car.
7) Curse.
8) Drag the tree to your front door. Spend 15 minutes figuring out how to open the door while simultaneously getting the tree through it.
9) Drag the tree away from the door so that you can enter the house with the tree facing in the right direction.
10) Once inside, fill the tree stand with water.
11) Knock all the water out of the tree stand because you forgot to wait to fill the tree stand until after putting the tree in it.
12) Curse.
13) Your tree should now be in the stand. Notice the fallen needles that have reduced your tree to half the size it was when you bought it.
14) Down seven cups of eggnog to settle your nerves.
15) Curse slurringly.

You're not home free yet. It's time to get decorating, and there's so much more that can go wrong!

Securing Christmas lights to the tree can be a production. One year, when we finally stood back and flicked on the light switch, I noticed that a branch obscured our prized angel ornament. I grabbed the pruning shears, mounted a stool, snipped once, and the lights went

out. My husband quietly said, "You don't have your glasses on, do you?"

LYNN KITCHEN

Your Christmas tree has practically become a member of the family: the needy, spoiled, flamboyant side that knows when it's time to go:

"All that time spent selecting and decorating, and a week after [Christmas], you see the tree by the side of the road, like a mob hit. A car slows down, a door opens, and a tree rolls out."

COMEDIAN JERRY SEINFELD

Let's relax and read Christmas cards! Far more than just holiday greetings, they allow you to finally see what your accountant's family looks like.

We once received a Christmas card with a photograph of a family in costumes and masks. No name, no text, no return address. We never did figure out who sent it.

GLYNIS BUSCHMANN

You know you're getting old when Santa starts looking younger.

ROBERT PAUL

What do you call that period five minutes after the gifts are opened? Christmess.

How did Mary and Joseph know that Jesus was 7lb 6oz when he was born? They had a weigh in a manger

DAILY MAIL

How much did Santa pay for his sleigh? Nothing; it was on the house.

One Christmas, my grandfather gave me a box of broken glass. He gave my brother a box of Band-Aids and said, "You two share."

STEVEN WRIGHT

Did you hear about the bald man who got a comb for Christmas? He'll never part with it.

Why did the Christmas light bring his entire family to the bar? Because when one goes out, they all go out.

Would you like to learn how to write a boastful, overly intimate holiday letter? Our how-to guide can help, illustrated with real quotes.

- **Open strong, seizing ownership of the battler role:** "What was [the year] like for you? Did the flood waters rise and storms of life rain on you? If so, we understand..."
- **Brag about any new job developments – especially if you don't deserve them:** "I got promoted this year to VP ... shows how little they really know about my past!!!"
- **Be creative! Even good news can be delivered so the reader cringes:** "[My wife has] felt almost every negative feeling you can have during a pregnancy – nausea, fatigue, rashes, arthritis, sciatic nerve pain, hip pains, and strong emotional conditions."
- **If you want to cement your status as least favourite distant cousins, just write the most dreaded words in the English language:** "We thought it would be cool if we shared what's going on as a PowerPoint presentation." **BRANDON SPECKTOR**

Sources: worstchristmasletters.blogspot.com

There are those who live by the credo that it is better to give than to receive. Without them, we wouldn't get as many presents, or this gloriously mixed-up exchange.

An ad spotted in a newspaper: "Congratulations George B. for pleasing 15 women for an entire day! We were all exhausted and very satisfied."

The next day's ad: "Our sincere apology to George B. Our intentions were to thank him for a generous holiday shopping trip, which he arranged. Any inappropriate innuendos were unintentional."

Source: clamorly.com

Wait, we all know that presents are not what Christmas is all about. Let us pause while these children remind us about the story of Christmas:

What animals were there when baby Jesus was born? "There was a donkey, a sheep, and a cow there as well as Mary and Joseph. It sounds quite crowded."

HANNAH, AGE SEVEN

What gifts did the three wise men bring? "They brought Jesus presents of gold, frankincense, smurr, and silver. But I think he would have preferred wrestling toys." **JAY, AGE FIVE,** from the *Daily Mail*

OK, enough pretending. Give us the presents already!

Scene: Christmas morning, and I'm opening my gifts.

Dad: "Open that one next, sweetie." (He points to a box, which I open. Inside is one of those obnoxious singing-and-dancing robot Christmas trees. I'm a bit shocked, as I had pointed out how much I hate these things when we went

shopping together just the week before.)
Me: "Uh, weren't you listening when I said I thought these were the most annoying things ever?"
Dad: "I know, I know. But ... open that one next."
(This time he points to a long, heavy package. I open it up to reveal a sledgehammer.)
Me: "Is this for what I think it's for?"
Dad: "And you thought I wasn't paying attention!" From notalwaysrelated.com

Even the family pet takes part.

My First Toy
My first toy
Has wood for me to claw
My first toy
Has string for me to bite
My first toy
Has a hole for me
to hide in
My first toy
Is called, "Oh,
dear God, no!
My guitar!"
My first toy
Is the best toy of
them all.

FRANCESCO MARCIULANO,
from the book *I Knead My Mommy, And Other Poems by Kittens*

The gifts are opened, the eggnog consumed, and your kid has begun a demands wish list for next year. If you're feeling woozy, it may be because you've contracted at least one of these seasonal maladies:

- **Gingervitis:** A Martha Stewart-like state of perfectionism manifested when building elaborate gingerbread homes.
- **Seasonal Affection Disorder (SAD):** An exaggerated emotional response (typically shrieking and air-kissing) triggered by seeing insignificant acquaintances at annual parties.
- **Gift-aphasia:** Loss of memory that causes the accidental recycling of gifts back to the same people who gave them to you last year.

BOB MORRIS, from the *New York Observer*



STOP THAT NOISE IN YOUR HEAD

Tinnitus can make you crazy. Here's how to tone it down

BY ANITA BARTHOLOMEW

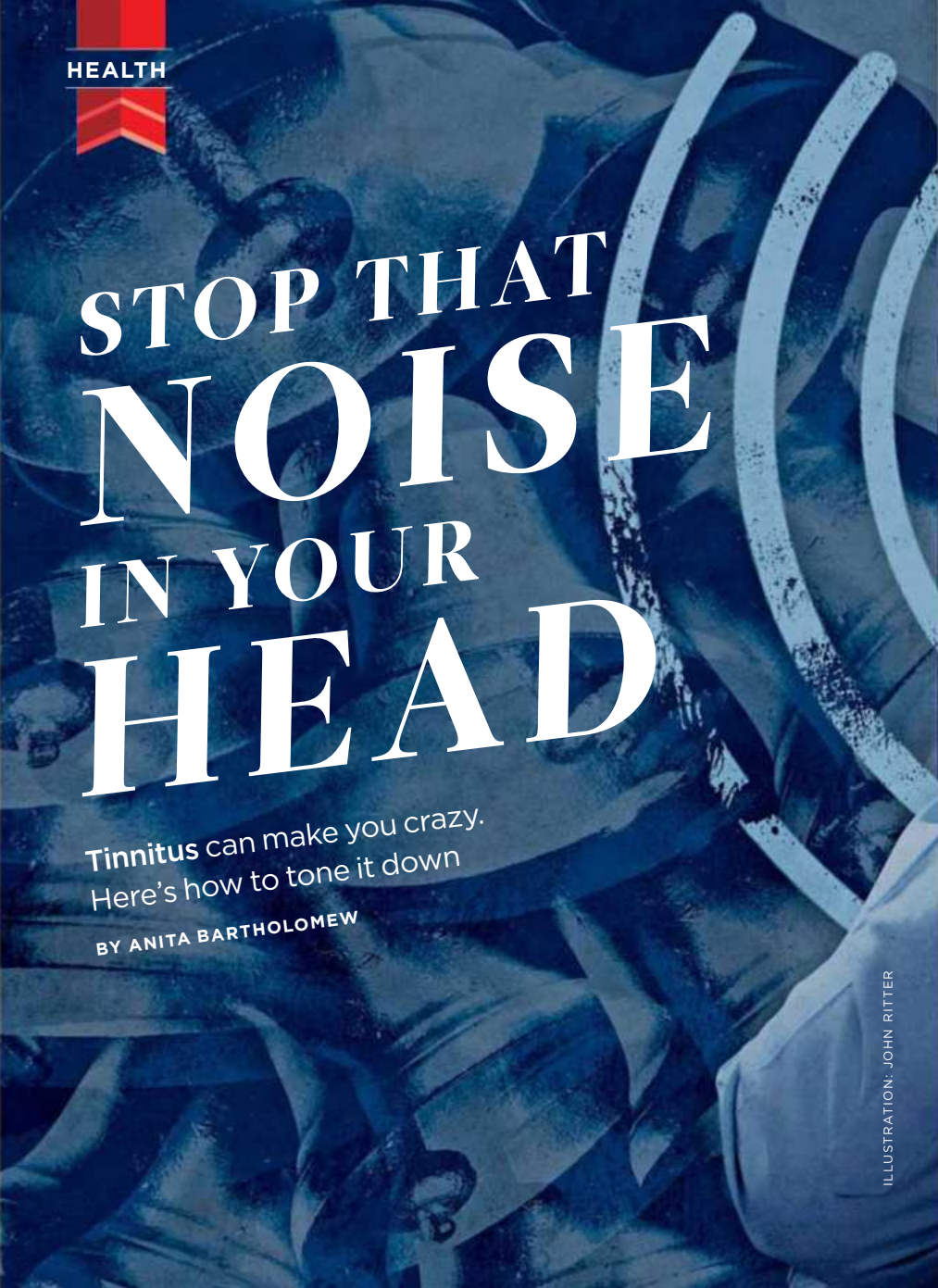


ILLUSTRATION: JOHN RITTER



When Justus Bennet, now 57, developed facial paralysis – probably brought on by stress – his doctors sent him to hospital for tests, concerned he might have a brain tumour. There medics piped different sounds into his ears as they measured his brain's responses. The test found no abnormalities, but something strange occurred.

"One frequency sounded like a hammer bashing steel," Justus recalls. Immediately, his left ear began to ache. Then came a shrill tone, so loud it sounded to him like a scream. But it hadn't come through the earphones. There was no identifiable source.

That was in 1998. The noise-from-nowhere was tinnitus. Its din hasn't stopped for more than a few hours since.

A surprisingly large number of people around the globe (including me) experience ringing, chirping, clicking, buzzing or other noises with no external source. Tinnitus affects over 300 million people worldwide, with around 10% of the population having it to some degree, and 2% being affected in a debilitating way. And the older you get, the more likely you are to be affected.

Tinnitus can be intermittent or constant; soft or loud. And when it makes it difficult to understand a conversation, or follow a programme on TV, tinnitus can drive you a little batty. Dr Michael Seidman, director of Otologic and Neurotologic Surgery at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, Michigan, says he sees some patients who have been divorced, "who can't work, who are just debilitated by it".

What's behind this infernal, internal racket – and how do you mute the volume?

"Tinnitus is not a disease," explains Deborah Hall, professor of Hearing Science at the University of Nottingham, UK. "It's a symptom that can follow from a range of different medical conditions."

The known causes vary: loud noises; hearing loss; physical injury; Meuniere's disease; certain medications; genetics – even ear wax. Sometimes, the cause can't be pinned down.

At a tinnitus clinic in Portland, Oregon, more than 90% of patients were found to have some degree of hearing impairment, even if mild enough to go unnoticed. "The exact pitch where you have your hearing loss is often also where you have your tinnitus," says neuroscientist Professor Berthold Langguth of the University of Regensburg, Germany.

Because there is no single cause, "That probably means there's no one single intervention that is going to work for all people," says Professor Hall. But it might also mean that,

for people with tinnitus caused by a particular injury or condition, there could be more effective treatments than the overall statistics suggest.

CURRENT TREATMENTS

Dr Seidman advises people who have been told there's no way to quiet the cacophony to go back to the doctor and ask again. "There are no cures, but there are things we can do to help manage the problem." He recommends that sufferers start with the simplest approaches and only move on to more complex ones if those fail. Here are several useful treatments available now:

■ **Take Vitamins** "There was a study that showed more people with tinnitus had a B12 deficiency, for example, and some of those patients got better when they supplemented with the B12," says Dr Seidman. Other studies suggest that zinc deficiencies can contribute to tinnitus. People with such deficiencies, when given zinc supplements, often report some relief. Adding zinc won't help, however, if blood levels are already at normal levels. The herb gingko biloba, while often prescribed, performed no better than placebo in several studies.

■ **Quiet the Phantom Sound** One of the more dramatic reductions in tinnitus demonstrated in a clinical trial was achieved in the early 1990s with alprazolam (aka Xanax, Xanar or Zopax). The small study found alprazolam reduced tinnitus loudness in 76% of sufferers versus 5% on placebo.

"Smart people ask, 'does it actually turn down the volume of my tinnitus or does it turn down my annoyance?'" says Dr Seidman. Probably a bit of both, is his conclusion. The neurotransmitter that's associated with anxiety is also the one "that take[s] sound from your ear to your brain," he explains. Because alprazolam influences this neurotransmitter, "we do think it does turn down the volume."

Two similar drugs, clonazepam and oxazepam have also been reported to help some tinnitus sufferers.

Gabapentin, a drug that is typically prescribed for control of epilepsy, lowered the volume of tinnitus in people who have inner ear damage caused by exposure to loud noises, reported a study in 2006, but not in those with tinnitus due to other causes.

For those people with the dual diagnoses of major depression and tinnitus, two studies found that



the anti-depressants sertraline and nortriptyline can sometimes lower tinnitus volume and annoyance. Researchers caution, however, against prescribing anti-depressants for non-depressed people.

■ **Increase Normal Sound Volume** Because hearing loss so often accompanies tinnitus and vice-versa, among the primary treatments are hearing aids. These don't eliminate tinnitus, but make it easier for some to hear despite it – and they sometimes make the chirping, whistling, whirring and ringing easier to ignore. But because hearing aids can't eliminate the phantom sound itself, many people need a more comprehensive approach.

■ **Add Another Sound** Masking therapy pipes a pleasant tone (music or the sound of water, for example) into the ear through a device that may or may not include a hearing aid. It works by distracting from the phantom noise. The greatest successes with masking, according to a study published in 2003, are achieved by matching the pitch of the tinnitus with that of the new sound.

■ **Trick the Brain's Noise-Maker** A paper published in 2013 points to several new masking-type devices that pipe specific tones into the tinnitus-affected ear, to try to reset the brain so it stops producing that phantom racket. Preliminary studies conducted by the device manufacturers show promise.

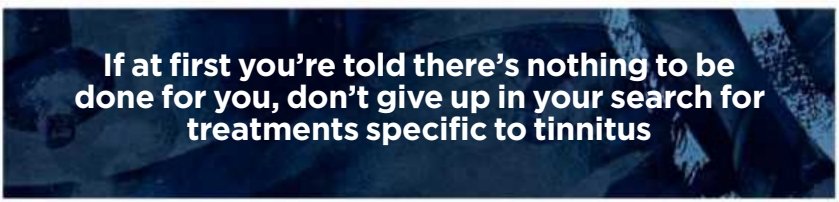
FUTURE TREATMENTS

According to Professor Hall, there is a host of potentially better treatments – that may bring the sounds of silence – just around the corner.

■ **New Medications** Many experts are excited by the potential of a new drug, AM-101, now in clinical trials. One early study "showed that tinnitus loudness significantly decreased with a high dose of AM-101," says Dr Seidman, who is involved with the trials. It won't work for everyone. But if proven safe and effective, it might be the magic bullet for some.

A second drug, AUT00063, is in very preliminary trials. "They're looking to change the way that the brain deals with sound information at a stage higher up than the ear," says Professor Hall. Early experiments yielded positive findings.

■ **Vagal Nerve Stimulation** The brain deciphers what the ear has heard – but



sometimes, as in tinnitus, it fills in the blanks if it doesn't get enough input. Because the vagus nerve delivers the actual signals from the ear to the brain, researchers hope to use that connection to retrain the brain about what's real and what's not.

A small vagal nerve stimulation (VNS) device is surgically implanted in the tinnitus sufferer's chest and wired to the vagus nerve, a large nerve that runs from the body through the neck to the head. As different tones within the wearer's actual hearing range are played through headphones, the VNS sends mild electrical signals to the brain. Over time, the hope is that the brain will rewire itself to distinguish real sounds from the fake pitches generated by tinnitus. Clinical trials are in progress. Reports say that preliminary research is promising.

■ **Magnets To Reprogram the Brain** The theory behind low-frequency transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) is much like the one behind the VNS device. Guided by brain scan images, large magnetic devices are positioned at specific points on the head to reprogram the way the brain processes phantom sound. And when it works, TMS works amazingly well. "Most of the people who had some response, still reported improvement two to four years later," says Professor Langguth. But only about 10% of all treated patients reported good improvement. Another 30-40% had slight improvements. Professor Langguth and others are working to make it more effective.

JUSTUS BENNET, meanwhile, like too many others, although prescribed hearing aids for hearing loss in both ears, was offered no treatment at all specifically for tinnitus.

But it might not need to be that way for him or for others with this annoying affliction. If your doctor tells you nothing can be done for your tinnitus, don't give up. You might even give that doctor a copy of this article. R

* * *

REVEALING SURVEY FINDINGS

Of 2392 Americans surveyed on what tech terms mean, 27% thought that "gigabyte (GB)" was an insect commonly found in South America, while 23% thought an "MP3" was a "S*tar Wars*" robot, and 18% identified "Blu-ray" as a marine animal.

Meanwhile, another US study of 1000 people found that 51% believe stormy weather "affects" cloud computing.

TECHTIMES.COM, INDEPENDENT.CO.UK



START AT THE BEGINNING:

A space probe is any unmanned device sent outside the Earth's atmosphere to gather scientific data. The first was the Soviet Union's beachball-sized *Sputnik I* which orbited our planet for three months after its October 4, 1957, launch. Seventeen weeks later the US sent up its own probe, *Explorer 1*. The "Space Race" had begun.

BY HAZEL FLYNN

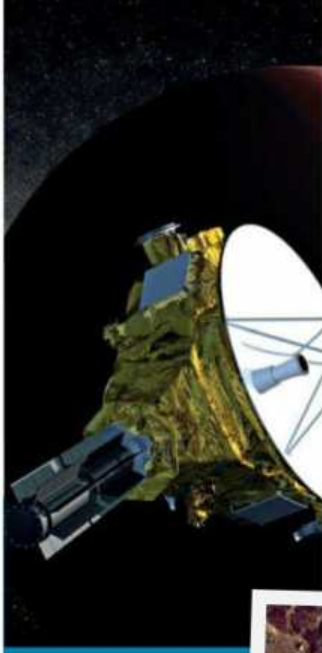
Space Probes

TELL ME MORE:

As technology improved, probes went further into space, sending data back via radio signal. In 1962 NASA's *Mariner 2* had the first successful interplanetary encounter, flying within 35,000km of Venus – near enough to read its temperature and analyse its atmosphere. Just 18 months later *Mariner 4* sent back the first "close-up" photos of a planet: Mars. In 1976, rovers *Viking 1* and *Viking 2* made the first successful landing on Mars. In November 2014, *Philae*, a lander launched from the European Space Agency's *Rosetta* probe, made history by landing on a comet nucleus. Since July 14, Pluto has been closely probed by *New Horizons*.



The Mars Exploration Rovers* Spirit *and* Opportunity *landed on the Red Planet in 2004





62,140km/h
The current speed of *Voyager 1*.

40,140 billion km
Distance to Proxima Centauri, the nearest star to Earth. Neither Voyager is aimed in its direction.

1982
The number of confirmed exoplanets (planets outside the solar system) known as of September 18, 2015.



HOW FAR INTO SPACE HAVE WE GONE?

Although probes have become ever more sophisticated, none have surpassed the achievements of *Voyager 1* and *Voyager 2*, launched in 1977. Both are still travelling and sending back data. More remarkable is the distance they've covered. Earth is around 149.6 million km from the Sun. *Voyager 2* is now more than 100 times further away from the Sun. *Voyager 1* has become the first human-made object to reach interstellar space by crossing the heliopause – the area where the solar wind gives way to interstellar wind. It's currently a mind-blowing 19.9 billion km from our Sun, gathering data on the outer reaches of the solar system. The signals it sends back travel at the speed of light but with only about the power of a fridge lightbulb, yet NASA's Deep Space Network can pick them up. They both have enough fuel to operate until at least 2025.



Carl Sagan with a replica of a Viking rover. The rovers currently on Mars can't investigate the planet's water for fear of contaminating the Martian ecosphere

WHAT POWERS THEM?

If they are "only" going to Mars, probes can gather energy from special solar panels; further from the Sun they need more power than the panels can generate, so they use small radioisotope thermoelectric generators which create electricity from the natural decay of radioactive material.

WHY ARE WE PROBING SPACE ANYWAY?

The original reason was simply to build knowledge but, according to Stephen Hawking and other commentators, this data-gathering has become essential to provide alternative possibilities when Earth can no longer sustain human life.

"If we survive as a human species, it's inevitable – we are going to have to leave the planet ... At some point we have to make the leap, and we have to find other resources in the universe – and that starts now."

British astronaut **TIM PEAKE.**



PHOTOS: NASA; GETTY IMAGES [ALL FIGURES AS OF SEPTEMBER 2015]



How Far Can We Push Our Bodies?

BY JUDY DUTTON

FROM *POPULAR SCIENCE*

WE HUMANS are programmed to grow stronger, faster, and smarter; to climb higher, live longer and populate every last metre of real estate. Many world records have been toppled in the past few decades, but when will our progress peak? No matter how we enhance our natural capabilities, our potential is bound by scientific principles – laws of physics, biomechanics and thermodynamics – that don't yield to human ambition. Here, scientists talk about the boundaries as we know them today, and where they're likely to end up in the future.

Most Weight We Can Lift: 455 kilograms

The world's strongest weightlifters can hoist 455kg – but Todd Schroeder, a biokinesiologist at the University of Southern California, thinks they're wimping out. Our brains limit the number of muscle fibres activated at any time to keep us from getting hurt. "Turn that safety off, and you can produce a lot more force," Schroeder says. He thinks optimal training, including mental, may help athletes tap as much as 20% more strength.

Tallest We Can Grow: 2.72 metres

In the 1930s, Robert Pershing Wadlow, aka the Giant of Illinois, reached this world record due to an overactive pituitary gland. His towering stature severely stressed his circulatory system (he couldn't feel his feet) and placed structural pressure on his bones (he wore braces when he walked). As a result of these physical limitations, engineer Thomas Samaras estimates that while the average human has grown taller due to better nutrition, we will eventually level off at about 2.1m. His studies have also found shorter people generally live longer lives – although others dispute this claim.

Most We Can Remember: 1 million gigabytes

If your brain's one billion storage neurons held one memory apiece, "you might have only a few gigabytes of storage space, similar to a USB flash drive," says Paul Reber, a psychologist at Northwestern University. But each neuron actually forms about 1000 connections to other neurons, exponentially expanding the brain's storage capacity to around one million gigabytes. The bottom line is that storage isn't the problem: our ability to record and retrieve data is.

Smartest We Can Get: IQ of 198

This honour goes to Abdesselam Jelloul, who set this record in a 2012 adult IQ test. But a few prodigies aside, if your score approaches Einstein's 160, you're probably at humanity's upper reaches. "Our brain operates close to its information-processing capacity," says Simon

PHOTO: DAN SAELINGER/TRUNK ARCHIVE

Laughlin, a neurobiologist at the University of Cambridge. This is due to a range of electrical trade-offs: if the human brain were to get bigger, it would be less efficient.

Fastest We Can Run: 10.5 metres per second

After Olympic sprinter Usain Bolt broke the 100m world record at the 2008 Olympics, Mark Denny, a biologist at Stanford University, wondered whether "Lightning Bolt" had sprinted as fast as a human can go. After having graphed 100m records back to the 1920s, Denny predicts humans will plateau at about 9.48 seconds over 100m, or 0.10 seconds faster than Bolt's current record of 9.58 seconds (10.44 m/s) – a lot speedier in a sport in which differences are measured by 100th of a second.

Most Friends We Can Have: 150 friends

We're not talking about Facebook friends, but real ones that you can depend on. With that criteria, 150 is the max, says Robin Dunbar, a psychologist at the University of Oxford. This is the number of people you can have a relationship with involving trust and obligation, he says, not just names and faces. Dunbar examined census data on tribal groups, which averaged out at 148 members. The same number regularly crops up in modern business. Most famously, the founder of GoreTex insisted on completely separate factory units of 150 workers so people would be more likely to be pals.

Longest We Can Go Without Sleep: 11 days

In 1964, Randy Gardner, a 17-year-old from San Diego, woke up at 6am to start his school science project: an attempt to break the world record for days without sleep. He succeeded. Gardner made it to 11 days while William Dement, a Stanford University psychiatrist, documented it and monitored his vitals. Gardner remained lucid, albeit irritable. Since then, studies have shown that rats deprived of shut-eye will die within 30 days, and a rare disease called fatal familial insomnia, which stops people from dozing off at all, causes death in a few months to a few years.

Longest We Can Go Without Solid Food: 382 days

Of course, this feat is easier to accomplish if you're obese to start with – which was the case with "Patient A.B." The 27-year-old, under observation at the University of Dundee in Scotland, weighed 207kg when he started his fast in the 1973 study. With a diet of purely non-caloric food such as yeast and multivitamins, he dropped to 82kg by the time the study ended, more than a year later. Needless to say: don't try this at home. R

POPULAR SCIENCE (AUGUST 12, 2014) © 2014 BY JUDY DUTTON. POPSCI.COM

That's Outrageous!

SO SUE ME!



A WOMAN sued the city of St. Paul, Minnesota, for $1900, claiming a parks and recreation employee drove a department vehicle into her parked car, causing damage. Confusing matters is the fact that the woman works for the department. Really confusing matters is the fact that she was the reckless driver who smashed into her own car. "Because I was working for the city and driving the city vehicle, I feel they are responsible," she said. Source: twincities.com

MILA KUNIS is a chicken thief, says Kristina Karo. Karo insists that when they were in first grade, the future actress absconded with her pet fowl. The pilfering turned Karo into an emotional wreck, so much so that 25 years later, she sued Kunis for $5000. Kunis denied the charges, and Karo later dropped the suit. Source: tmz.com

COUNCIL MEMBER Kirby Delauter from Frederick County, Maryland, was so unhappy with an article that ran in the *Frederick News-Post*, he threatened a lawsuit should the paper ever mention him again. The *News-Post* answered with an editorial titled "Kirby Delauter, Kirby Delauter, Kirby Delauter," and repeated his name 26 times, not counting various anagrams of his name, like "Rebuked Artily" and "Bakery Diluter". Source: *Frederick News-Post*

WHAT'S AN UMPIRE'S MISTAKE during an American football game worth? If it's in the playoffs, $88 billion, says one Colorado prison inmate. He sued the NFL and others for a poor ruling that cost his beloved Dallas Cowboys the game, causing their fans "true injury". Source: wfaa.com

A COMMUTER sued Showtime and New York's transit authority because an advertisement caused her to break an ankle. The ad for the crime show *Dexter,* featuring the star's face covered in a plastic sheet, was so startling, the horrified woman lost her balance and fell down a subway staircase. "It's advertising gone amok," says her lawyer. Source: dnainfo.com

ILLUSTRATION: NISHANT CHOKSI

PERSONAL ESSAY

I hadn't been born yet
when my father killed her.
But she's alive in my mind.

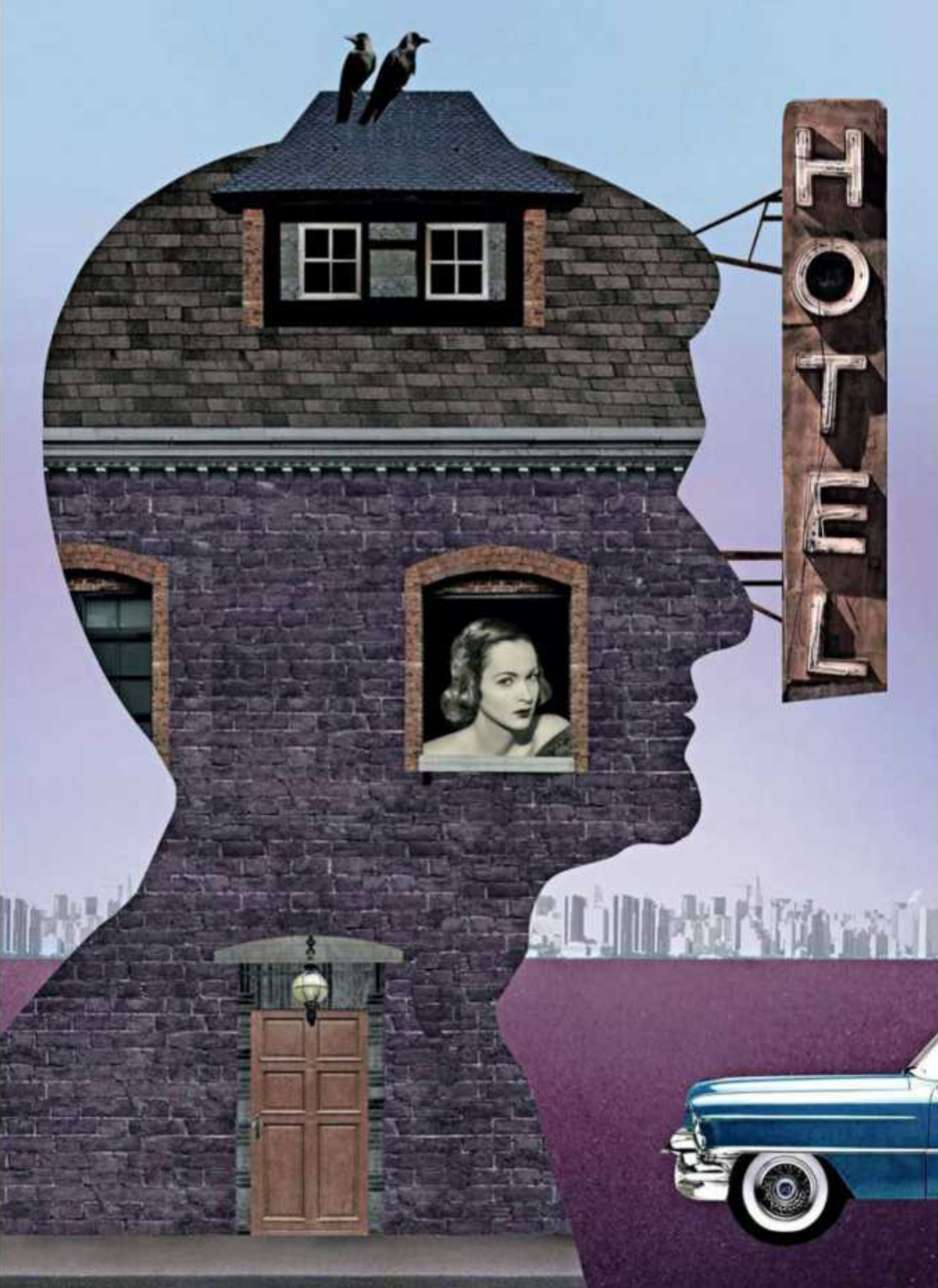
Grace Was Her Name

BY LORENZO CARCATERRA

I HAVE NEVER MET GRACE MONTE. But not a day goes by when I don't think about her and what her life was like, her few happy moments along with her many difficult ones. I've always wondered about the sound of her voice and the kind of life she had once imagined having before she married my father. Her actual life was short and troubled, stuck on a dead-end path with a deadbeat man, with a child to raise and the threat of physical violence a constant presence.



ILLUSTRATION BY ANTHONY TREMMAGLIA


HOTEL

IN LATE OCTOBER 1946, Grace was 24, and my father, Mario Carcaterra, was 29 and already set in his troubled ways. Their daughter, Phyllis, was six. Grace and my father were separated for the third or fourth time – their few friends couldn't keep track of the on-again, off-again marriage. Grace had taken a small room in a third-rate hotel about 1.6km from the cramped New York apartment they'd shared. She was weary of the unpaid bills, angry outbursts, and painful blows that were inflicted on her and then followed by tearful apologies and pleas for forgiveness. She could no longer tolerate the affairs my father carried on with a string of women – some of them her friends – and the near-daily interference from her mother-in-law, a domineering figure with a hypnotic hold over her son.

> *My mother shared with me the dark secret she carried in her heart*

Grace opened the hotel-room door after my father's second knock. She stood there in a slip, her dark hair covering one side of her face. He barged in and began the routine that she was all too familiar with: he spoke of a new job coming through, a new place to live, a better life for them. His words had worked in the past but not on this cold autumn morning. Years of lies, abuse, and frustration weighed on Grace, and she wanted so much to be free of them. She lashed out at my father, telling him their marriage was over, the love she'd once felt for him had dissipated, and this time their separation was final.

Then Grace said she was in love with another man.

The short leash that barely held my father's temper in check snapped. He tossed her on the bed. They struggled, Grace scratching, kicking, and clawing at him, but my father was much too strong a man. Straddling her thin body, he grabbed a pillow. He saw the fear in his wife's eyes, pushed the pillow against her face, and held it there, his hands and arms keeping it tight.

Within several minutes that must have felt like hours, my father, his body drenched in sweat, removed the pillow and stared down at the woman he loved.

Grace Monte was dead.

My father was no longer a wayward husband and a gambler. He was no longer a man dominated by his mother. My father was a murderer.

I WAS 14 YEARS OLD in 1969 when I heard the name Grace Monte. I was in Italy, visiting relatives on Ischia, an island off the coast of Naples. It was there on a beautiful

beach in the middle of a sun-soaked morning, the two of us walking along the shore, that my mother shared with me the dark secret she carried in her heart. She was concerned that I was spending too much time in my father's company and that of his friends. She dreaded the possibility that I would become who he was, a man she lived with and feared. She felt that this spot, far from our Manhattan neighbourhood, was the safest place to tell me the truth about my father.

In short order, I learned he had confessed to the crime and was convicted of second-degree murder. He served nearly eight years in prison. Shortly after his release, he married my mother in an arrangement brokered by their families. She was a widow with a son – my half brother, Anthony. She knew that my father had been in prison but claimed to have not known about the murder until the first night of their honeymoon.

I have no choice but to believe her, to be convinced that even in her loneliness, in her desire to offer a better life for her son, she would not have married a wife killer. She said that she felt numb when he told her of the homicide in a manner as relaxed as if he were ordering a late-night meal. From that moment, she knew she had made the gravest mistake of her life.

I spent the rest of the day alone and in stunned silence. I sat on that beach until well into nightfall. I had thought I knew my father as well as any son my age could. But after that day, I would never think of him in the same way again.

I had, to that point, not been close to my mother. At best, she and I had had a frosty relationship. I couldn't understand why she harboured such anger toward me. She seemed to resent the fact that I resembled my father. A deeply religious woman, she had few friends, detested my father's family, and never learned to speak English. Yet she was dependent on an undependable man for all her needs.

As I grew older, I came to understand her anger. She had made a horrific choice and was a prisoner in a loveless marriage for 34 years, not to be freed until my father's death from cancer in 1988. She then moved back to Italy, where she lived, a shell of a once-vibrant woman, until her death in 2004. We spoke regularly during that time, and I sent her money whenever I could. But our relationship had been poisoned from birth.

YEARS PASSED before I spoke to my father about the murder. But my knowing about it altered our close bond. I no longer felt at ease in his company, and I looked for excuses not to spend time with him. Our laughter-filled days at the racetrack and nights cheering on fighters at Madison Square Garden became distant memories. Instead, I devoted the bulk of my free time to finding out

what I could about the woman he had killed and the child he'd left behind.

My father's family shut the door to any questions I had about Grace. To them, her murder was a shame and a horror that they did not want to relive. Over the years, a few pieces of the stained puzzle of my father's past slipped out. Once, at a relative's house, I spotted a copy of a true-crime magazine from the 1940s. The cover story was about my father and Grace, with a headline that blared "No Other Man Could Have Her". And there was the photo that fell out of a family album. I didn't have to be told whose picture it was; all I needed to see was the reaction of the other people at the table, frantically hiding it. But I had seen enough. She was as beautiful as I'd imagined her to be, her eyes filled with passion and with a smile as bright as any light.

> "Grace and I are linked by murder and blood, and we always will be

I did meet my half sister once at a wedding reception I attended with my father. I was ten, and she was 24. We were introduced by a cousin who told me she was a family friend, but as drinks were poured, lips became looser. An old woman from the neighbourhood pulled me aside, smiled, pointed at her, and said, "That young girl is your sister. You're not supposed to know about her, and that's wrong. But you should know – a brother deserves to know." I was struck by how much she resembled my father.

My most lingering memory of my half sister occurred at the end of the evening. She and I were sitting in the backseat of a crowded car. With one arm around my shoulders, she leaned down and kissed me gently on the top of my head. "I hope we see each other again," she whispered.

After the car pulled to a stop, she got out and walked away. I wanted to jump out and hug her. I felt a connection to her, a bond. I was later told by relatives that she was prohibited by law from having anything to do with her father or his family. But she and my father secretly kept in contact and, I came to learn, met once or twice a year. Later still, I found out that she had five children and had moved numerous times. Although I want answers, my half sister has wanted peace. At the very least, I feel I owe her that much.

I WAS A MARRIED MAN with two children of my own by the time I finally spoke to my father about Grace Monte. Although I had tried numerous times to broach the subject, I could never muster the words or the courage. In 1988, he was dying of cancer, in the late stages of

a disease that had sapped him of his strength and forced him to direct his anger at his illness instead of at others. He knew that I had been told about his crime, and he wanted to tell me that while he had loved my mother in his own way, Grace Monte was his one true love.

His powerful sense of loss, the emptiness and loneliness he had endured in silence for all those years since that horrible day in the hotel room in 1946 – that was his real punishment. "I ask myself one question every day," my father said. "The same question. Why? Why? Why did I kill her? Why?" He had mourned for Grace every day since her death. My father was a tortured man, sentenced to live and die under the weight of an unforgivable crime.

Grace Monte is as much a part of my life as she was a part of my father's. Even now, I try to learn as much about her as I can. I know she loved to dance and heard Frank Sinatra sing live at the Rustic Cabin in New Jersey. She enjoyed going to the movies and, like my father, preferred James Cagney to Humphrey Bogart. She had a sharp sense of humour and a quick temper, and she doted on her only child. She didn't care much for religion or neighbourhood gossip. She liked reading, and despite her lack of money, she always looked stylish.

Grace Monte is my constant shadow, a woman never known but always seen, a woman I will never be able to forget. I have come to think of her in the same way that one thinks of an old friend long gone or a first love. We are linked – Grace and I – and we always will be. It is a link forged by murder and blood, but it exists, and nothing can sever it.

Not now.

Not ever. R

* * *

TECHNOLOGICAL BREAKDOWN

These confident predictions couldn't have been further from the truth.

"I think there's a world market for maybe five computers."

Thomas Watson, president of IBM, 1943

"Nuclear-powered vacuum cleaners will probably be a reality within ten years."

Alex Lewyt, president of Lewyt vacuum company, 1955

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> *We must teach our children to dream with their eyes open.*
>
> HARRY EDWARDS

We help you get motivated
#QuotableQuotes and #PointstoPonder to get you through the day



Points to Ponder

THE AROMA of flour, sugar, and butter mingling in the oven is a better tonic than any alcohol. And the best recipe for a good evening is a dish so fragrant that it makes the tongue-tied start to talk. The formula is simple: when you cook for people, they feel cared for.

RUTH REICHL,
chef and food writer, in her book *My Kitchen Year*

WILDNESS IS EVERYWHERE ... It's on our hands, it's in our immune systems, it's in our lungs – where there are 2000 bacteria per square centimetre! ... Much of what we consider to be us is in fact not us. We breathe, and wildness comes in.

JACK TURNER,
nature writer, in the *Sun*

"YOU CAN BE anything you want to be" is pithy advice that isn't helping most of the young launch careers or find satisfaction ... If we really think about it, few of us mean it literally ... Perhaps what we're really trying to say to our children is that we trust in their ability to build a meaningful life.

LESLIE GARRETT,
writer, on aeon.com

WHAT KIND OF WORLD do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up? The question not only concerns the environment in isolation; the issue cannot be approached piecemeal.

POPE FRANCIS,
in his encyclical on the environment



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

In sports, there are rules that keep you safe. In life, there are rules that keep the world from descending into total chaos. In both, there are rules that people make up to hide behind or for their own benefit. You have to be smart enough to know the difference.

RONDA ROUSEY,
UFC women's bantamweight champion,
in her memoir, *My Fight/Your Fight*

Why Can't You Tickle Yourself?



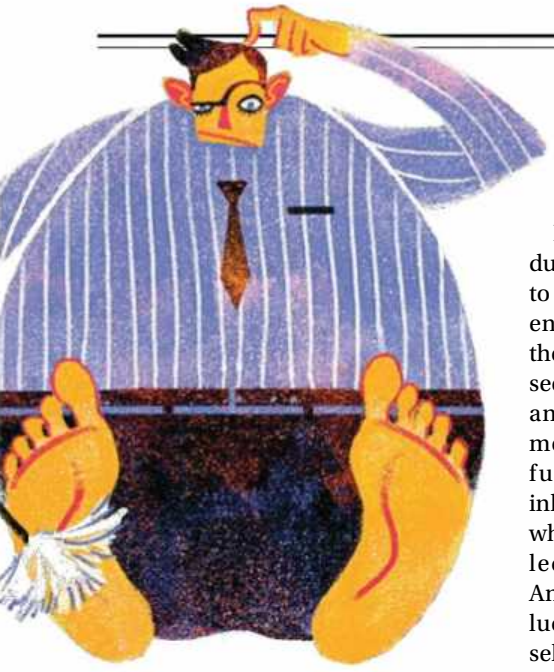
BY DAVID ROBSON FROM BBC.COM FUTURE

IF YOU WANT TO PROBE one of the great mysteries of the human mind, all you need is a feather duster and your feet. Sit back, take your shoes and socks off, and gently stroke the feathers against your sole. Now ask a friend to do the same for you. If you are like most people, you will be left stone-faced by one but convulsed in ticklish agony by the other. Why?

Once the domain of childhood curiosity, the question of why we can't tickle ourselves is now exciting neuroscientists. To understand their interest, consider this: every time your body moves, it creates sensations that could potentially confuse you in all kinds of ways. Just imagine the chaos if every time one of your hands brushed your leg, you assumed that someone was fondling or attacking you. Being able to distinguish between your movement and the actions of others is therefore a central part of our sense of self and agency, aspects of the psyche that even the smartest robots can't replicate – yet.

Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, of University College London, was one of the first to investigate the way the brain makes these lightning-fast decisions about the self and others. She scanned subjects' brains as her colleagues tickled the palms of their hands and as the participants attempted to do so themselves. From the resulting brain activity, she concluded that whenever we move our limbs, the brain's cerebellum produces precise predictions of the body's movements and then sends a second shadow signal that damps down activity in the somatosensory cortex (where tactile feelings are processed). The result is that when we tickle ourselves, we don't feel the sensations with the same intensity as we

ILLUSTRATION: MING HAI



would if they had come from someone else, and so we remain calm.

Blakemore suspected there could be ways to fool the process and allow people to tickle themselves. So she designed a machine that allowed her subjects to move a stick that gently stroked a piece of foam over their palm, sometimes instantaneously and at other times with a delay of up to 200 milliseconds. It turned out that the greater the delay, the more ticklish the foam felt, perhaps because the cerebellum's predictions no longer matched what the person was actually feeling.

Many others have since tried to find ways to trick the brain into tickling itself. For instance, controlling someone's foot movements with magnetic brain stimulation, so that the hand tickles the foot against the person's will, seems to do the trick.

But other experiments have produced puzzling results. One study tried to give subjects an out-of-body experience before tickling them, by fitting them with video goggles that let them see from the eyes of the experimenter and by synchronising their movements. Even with the subjects confused about which body they inhabited, they were largely unmoved when they pressed a button that tickled both bodies simultaneously. Another experiment, in which expert lucid dreamers tried to tickle themselves in their sleep, also failed.

It may seem random, but understanding the self-tickling barrier could answer more practical scientific questions, like why many schizophrenics can tickle themselves or whether robots ever could.

"Your inability to tickle yourself suggests neurologically based definitions of self and other," writes Robert Provine of the University of Maryland. "Developing a similar machine algorithm may lead to 'ticklish' robots [that can] distinguish touching from being touched and may provide a [new] construct of machine personhood." If so, a featherduster could soon provide a bizarre new test for artificial intelligence: just aim for the robot's feet and see if it laughs. R

JANUARY 9, 2015. © WWW.BBC.COM FUTURE

When the Tsonas family boarded a Greek ferry for a vacation, they never dreamt they would end up fighting for their lives

HOLIDAY DISASTER

BY KATHERINE LAIDLAW

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JANET REIDMAN





Natasa Tsonas, at home on Corfu, is haunted by her ill-fated voyage at sea

I HAVE TO SAVE MY FAMILY! The thought looped around and around as Natasa Tsonas stared at the burning wreckage. She stared at her two sons, Dimitri, 14, and Sempastian, 11, who were shocked into silence; she stared at the panic on her husband Nassos's face. But she couldn't breathe, couldn't shake the feeling that she was being choked. And she couldn't move, either. Frozen, Natasa stood on the upper deck of the ship she'd boarded four hours earlier and braced for an explosion.

It was pitch-black on the top level of the *Norman Atlantic*, the kind of middle-of-the-night darkness where it's impossible to make out anything more than a metre away. All black, save for the balls of fire blasted across the sky by the cold wind. Flames rained down around Natasa, her family and the hundreds of people who were screaming, crying and shoving their way to the top of the ship – and, they hoped, to safety. Natasa recalled the movie *Titanic*, in which children were rescued first and adults were governed by principles, even when faced with death. But that night – December 28, 2014 – she saw only chaos. The car ferry transporting her family from Igoumenitsa, Greece, to Ancona, Italy, was burning up in the middle of the Adriatic Sea with 499 people on board, and it was utter pandemonium.

THOUGH NATASA WAS BORN and raised in Toronto, Canada, she began spending summers visiting friends and their families on Corfu once she turned 17. It was during her fourth sojourn on the Greek island that she met Nassos Tsonas. She initially brushed off his advances, but his persistence eventually won her over (it didn't hurt that he was tall, dark and handsome). When Natasa returned the next year, they became a couple, and her departure at the end of that summer was painful.

Within nine months, Natasa had mapped out a different future for herself. She would leave school – she was in her final year of an international relations degree at the University of Toronto – and move to Greece to be with Nassos. It sounded crazy, even to her, but it felt right. Natasa expected her parents to lock her in her room; instead, her mother said, "If this is what's going to make you happy, go and try it." Two weeks after that, she was on a plane back to the island.

Twenty-one years later, the couple and their two sons were climbing aboard an Anek Lines ferry bound for Italy, just after midnight. The crossing was familiar – the Tsonases make the



En route to Italy in December 2014, the **Norman Atlantic** *went up in flames*

PHOTO: ITALIAN NAVY/HANDOUT

trip each year to meet with suppliers or pick up inventory for the leather-clothing store they co-own. They had sprung for the pricier of the two ship lines that travel from Corfu, spending €800 for a family cabin and to store their car below deck, but were switched to the *Norman Atlantic*, a lesser vessel.

The Tsonases had planned the trip after much consideration. The previous month, at home on Corfu, Natasa's best friend had died of cancer. Mourning the loss, Natasa and Nassos hadn't made any plans for their boys' Christmas vacation. In the past, they'd used those two weeks to take holidays abroad, but this year they couldn't muster the energy to plan an elaborate trip. Still, as the break drew closer, the idea of getting away had seemed more enticing. Nassos had suggested travelling to Baden-Baden, in Germany, where they'd be able to swim in hot springs and relax at a spa. So they'd take the ferry to Ancona and from there, fly to Baden-Baden.

Shortly after boarding, the group tucked in for the night. Four hours later, at 5.30am, Nassos and Natasa were awoken by a vague announcement over the ship's speakers. When Nassos stepped into the hallway to see what was going on, fellow passengers alerted him to the fire. He rushed back to tell his wife. "Natasa, we're going outside," he said. She brushed it off: "If it was anything serious, we would have been told." But Nassos insisted, so Natasa woke up their sons. At the last minute, she decided to grab her purse. "If Mom's going to save anything, it's going to be her cigarettes,"

Sempastian joked. It was also where she kept the family's passports.

The smell of smoke filled the corridor outside their cabin, and the family was swept up in the melee – hundreds of people were moving toward the ferry's upper deck. "Let's go to the top of the ship, so at least if



THE LIFEBOAT WAS MEANT TO BE THEIR ROUTE TO SAFETY, BUT THEY WEREN'T SURE THEY'D MAKE IT OUT ALIVE

it goes down, we'll be able to swim," Nassos said.

It was then that the severity of their situation finally registered: they were on a boat in the middle of a wild sea in the dead of night, and that boat was on fire. "I'm calling my parents," Nassos said to his wife. "You're going to make them sick," Natasa replied. Her husband looked at her. "It might be the last phone call I ever make." Their sons, wide-eyed and tearful, overheard his quiet words. "Mumma, what can we do?" Dimitri asked softly. Pray, she said, reminding them of Saint Spyridon, the patron saint of Corfu and performer of miracles. Natasa and Nassos pulled their sons into a hug and told them they loved them.

From where they stood, the family could see a single lifeboat and a long line of passengers waiting to jump on board. Natasa watched, horrified, as a woman ran for the boat, lost her footing and plummeted off the edge, into the churning sea. Suddenly, flames shot up through two holes in the top deck. The queue scattered and more than 50 people broke away, running from the fire and straight toward them. "We're going to get trampled!" Natasa screamed. "Move back!"

Once the horde had passed, Nassos saw an opening. He grabbed his wife and sons, pulled them through the flames and sent them over the railing onto the small orange lifeboat – their one shot at getting off the ship. Minutes later, the vessel was full and heading into the water to fend for itself. The family had put their lives in the hands of strangers whose faces they couldn't even make out in the darkness.

NATASA LIFTED HER HEAD from between her knees and wiped her mouth. The lifeboat bucked, sending a violent jolt through the people who sat hip to hip on its metal benches. Partially sheltered by a plastic cover from the furious swells, passengers threw up as the boat lurched through the night.

It was still so dark that Natasa couldn't see past Sempastian, huddled across the aisle less than a metre away. She was wedged in between

Nassos and Dimitri, vomit puddled around their feet. No-one spoke.

The sky began to brighten shortly after 7am, an hour or so after the lifeboat had been lowered into the water. For two more hours, the small craft rose and fell, jerking so wildly that Natasa felt like she was on a roller coaster without a restraining device – but with both a stomach flu and a hangover, multiplied by 100. Her legs soon became webbed with cuts from banging against the benches. Lightning cracked and water sloshed around, soaking the travellers. This was meant to be their route to safety, but in that moment, they weren't sure they would make it off the sea alive.

"There's a boat! We're going to be saved!" a fellow passenger yelled at around 9.30am. Natasa looked around, reassured by the presence of a bearded priest sitting near her family. The lifeboat soon knocked against the side of the *Spirit of Piraeus*, a freight ship from Singapore that had answered the *Norman Atlantic*'s distress call.

Within minutes, men aboard the freighter tossed down spools of thick black rope to the lifeboat below, where crew members and passengers used the cords to secure their craft to the cargo ship. After the vessels were tied together, the *Piraeus* dropped a long, narrow rope ladder. A few men had begun the slow haul up, swinging precariously in the wind, when the lines tying the lifeboat to its rescuer snapped, sending the smaller craft further back into the waves and perilously close to the ship's propeller.

Once the boat was resecured with new ropes, it was the Tsonases's turn. Natasa knew she had to send her sons up the ladder – to safety or to die. Dimitri would go first, in case one of his parents needed to assist him. As Natasa watched Dimitri climb the ladder, one slippery rung at a time, she thought, for the first time, that maybe they were at the end of their ordeal. The teenager made the climb, a three-minute feat that, for his parents, felt like forever. Natasa followed, and then Sempastian. For Nassos, watching his younger son ascend was agonising. "If he didn't succeed, I was ready to jump after him, to do whatever I could." Not long after Sempastian reached the top,

> THE TSONASES STRIPPED OFF THEIR CLOTHES AND HUDDLED TOGETHER, WRAPPED ONLY IN TOWELS AND SHEETS

the ropes snapped again, separating Nassos from his family for the half-hour it took the crew to reattach the lines. He eventually scaled the ladder and joined Natasa and their sons. In all, 49 passengers made it onto the freighter.



The Tsonases, on the freighter that eventually carried them to safety

In a small cabin on the *Spirit of Piraeus*, the Tsonases stripped off their clothes and huddled together, wrapped only in hand towels and sheets for warmth. After the boys fell asleep, Natasa and Nassos went to find food, returning with bowls of rice. They waited for nearly 12 hours while the ship stayed in the ferry's vicinity, unable to leave while the SOS call was still out. Around midnight on December 29, a crew member arrived at their door: it was finally time to go to shore. The family put their damp clothes back on and steadied themselves. It had been nearly 24 hours since they'd felt anything but sheer panic.

AS NATASA DESCENDED the final steps off the boat, now docked at the Italian city of Bari, she began to cry for the first time since leaving home. *Thank God*, she thought, shaking as she felt solid ground beneath her feet. A receiving line of emergency workers, vibrating with purpose, awaited the passengers filing off the ship. Nassos, Dimitri and Sempastian didn't need medical attention, but Natasa knew her legs – which were smeared with dried blood – would benefit from the care of an EMT. But hours before, she'd urinated on herself, overwhelmed when her husband had completed the treacherous climb up the rope ladder, and she didn't want anyone to know.

That night, exhausted after hours spent providing statements to the police, Natasa and 30 or so survivors climbed aboard a bus to the airport. The Tsonases stayed overnight in

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF NATASA TSONAS

Athens before returning to Corfu.

After Natasa and her family finally arrived home, she worried most about her sensitive eldest son, Dimitri. But it was Sempastian who was afraid to leave the house in the weeks that followed. He was terrified to go to school, to go anywhere. In February 2015, two months after the sinking of the *Norman Atlantic*, the family was booked on a ferry trip. But the night before they were to leave, Nassos panicked: the sky was an ominous grey and the water was rough. The family wasn't going anywhere.

The next month, Natasa, Nassos and their sons walked onto a ferry – Dimitri had to write exams in Ioannina, a city on the mainland. They sat white-knuckled as two hours ticked by. The voyage went smoothly.

As the months march forward, it gets a bit easier for the family to leave home. "I always thought travelling by ship was the safest way, but it's not that simple," says Natasa. "Someone told me ships aren't required to have enough places in a lifeboat for the number of passengers. If that's the case, I've been lying to myself all this time." As for Nassos, there's not a day that he doesn't think about that night. R

It is estimated that at least 28 people died on the *Norman Atlantic*. Those rescued were picked up in an international operation involving Italian and Greek ships and helicopters. While the shipping line put the manifest at 475 passengers, the prosecutor investigating the tragedy later suggested up to 500 people had been on board. The evacuation was ill managed, but there were heroes amid the chaos, including Ilia Kartozia, a Georgian priest who calmed evacuees and gave up his seat on a lifeboat for a woman and her child. He died in a fall from the ferry, his actions recognised in posthumous bravery awards.

* * *

DINNER AND A MOVIE

Do you have an appetite for puns? This little collection, seen at Twitter feed #foodfilms, should satisfy your craving.

The King's Peach

Lord of the Onion Rings

Black Forest Gump

One Flew Over the Couscous Nest

The Unbearable Lightness of Beans

Butch Casserole and the Sundried Squid

Life's Like That

SEEING THE FUNNY SIDE

From the Archives



Viewed through a modern lens, this submission to Life's Like That 65 years ago is pretty creepy. Please address your letters of complaint to December 1950.

A pretty young matron, walking through a sparsely settled district toward the bus stop one morning, realised she was being followed. Not wishing to turn and look, she increased her pace. The footsteps accelerated, too. Reaching a thickly populated area, she slowed down. The unknown did likewise.

At the bus stop she turned to face the offender; to her amazement it was the courtly old gentleman from next door. "Why, Mr Ashby," she exclaimed, "you frightened me. Why in the world didn't you speak or catch up with me?"

The old man doffed his hat and bowed. "Well, ma'am, I was having a debate with myself as to whether to catch up with you and enjoy the conversation, or stay behind and enjoy the view."

SUBMITTED BY S.K. JOYNES JNR

DUCKING THE ISSUE

My five-year-old, Matt, worked with a speech therapist on the "ch" sound, which came out "k". The therapist asked him to say "chicken". He responded with "kitchen". They tried again and again, but it always came out "kitchen". Undeterred, she pushed him for one more try. Matt sighed and said, "Why don't we call it a duck?"

SUBMITTED BY PAMELA SPINNEY



YOU JUST CAN'T WIN

Last Christmas morning, our young son set about opening his presents from Father Christmas, but to our dismay he didn't look very excited about his haul.

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

When we asked him what the matter was, he quietly replied, "Well, I was really hoping that you and Daddy would buy me something for Christmas this year."

SUBMITTED BY HOPE LEWIS

WELCOME ABROAD

Lifted straight from Russian travel books, check out these actual tips for visitors to the US attempting to adjust to American culture:

- "Women play a greater role in business. Often they insist to be treated exactly as an equal and not as a lady."
- "As a rule, the [social] invitation will be only on a weekend, and you don't have to prepare for something extravagant. Everything is the same as ours, only with far less booze."
- "'See you later' should not be taken literally. That is a courtesy, and no more."

Source: Mental Floss

FAIR WARNING

I recently visited a friend in hospice care who knew his time was at hand. He had kept his morale and sense of humour right to the end.

As I was getting ready to leave, I held his hand for a moment and thanked him for being a lifelong buddy. He smiled and said he would put in a "good word" for me.

When I expressed my gratitude, he replied, "Don't thank me yet. I don't know who I'll be talking to."

SUBMITTED BY DANIEL KLEIN

The Great Tweet-off: Christmas edition

'Tis the season to be tweetin' – but only if your comedy stylings can cut it alongside these Yuletide gems:

Eggnog is great because who hasn't been eating an omelette and thought, *I wish I could drink this*.

@SHAWNRIES

I bet the frankincense guy was all like, "Let's put the three items in one gift basket and the basket can be from all of us."

@AARONFULLERTON

"Wouldn't Santa's secret coal reserves cause huge price fluctuations in world energy markets?" – some kid who gets it.

@ROBHUEBEL

My wife hates when I give her a Christmas/birthday combo gift but that's what she gets for being born in May.

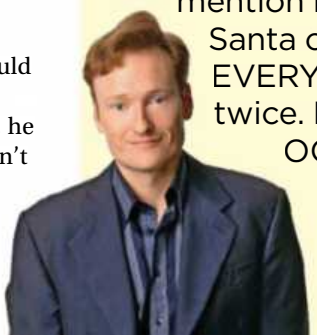
@MRBROKEIT

On the 13th day of Christmas, my true love said to me, "I think I might be a hoarder."

@JENSTATSKY

What the song doesn't mention is that Santa checks EVERYTHING twice. He has OCD.

@CONANOBRIEN



THE MOTH

True tales on...
ACCEPTANCE



TO THE MOON

BY STEVE ZIMMER,
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

"In honour of America's space programme, my child-hating first-grade teacher divides the class into three groups: stars, rockets and moons.

Despite being a moon, I easily identify the low-ability group. But even among the moons, I'm a bad moon. My report card says that I don't apply myself as a student, but it also questions my potential in case I do try.

Now, my mom and dad don't actually apply themselves as parents, but even if they did, there's no way they could know that I have severe ADD, because it doesn't exist yet, especially the quiet kind. One morning I notice that my classmates have all brought in five different leaf species. I assume it's a coincidence.

But then I look up at the nearest star – Kathy Welt. Her yellow folder says *Leaf Day,* and I'm like, I don't know it yet, but this moment will repeat itself in various forms throughout my life.

So I request bathroom permission, and the teacher, Miss Ross, says, "Are you just trying to go outside to pick leaves?"

And I say, "No."

And she says, "Do you know what deception is?"

And I'm like, "No," which is true. I don't. Hello, I'm a moon.

PHOTO: iSTOCK

MUGGER HUGGER

BY RANDI SKAGGS,
LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

"Get me some money, lady. You wouldn't be the first person I killed."

I considered running, but I'm slow. So I did what I do best when I'm nervous; I just started talking. I said, "I don't have it as bad as you do, sir, but I am sleeping on my floor right now, and all I ever eat are ramen noodles, not that I lost any weight or anything.

THE MOTH

These stories were told on stage at events hosted by The Moth. The not-for-profit organisation was started in 1997 by novelist George Dawes Green, who wanted to recreate in New York the sultry summer evenings of his native Georgia, when moths were attracted to the light on the porch where he and his friends spun sparkling tales. People from all walks of life have now shared more than 10,000 stories, performed live and without notes on stages across the US, Ireland and the UK. The Moth recently launched in Australia. For details visit www.themoth.org.

"You know, people from Kentucky call and they say, 'Oh, my God, New York City.' I don't have the heart to tell them I'm just a cliché, the kid who moves up here to change the world with her theatre. I'm not gonna change the world. My theatre stinks, really. I miss my mom, and I miss porch swings and sweet tea.

"So would you please not kill me, so I can just go back home where I belong?"

He looked at me funny, and then pulled me into a bear hug. It was my first human contact in months, actually.

HOORAY FOR HOLLYWOOD

BY CARLOS KOTKIN,
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

When I was 20 years old, I dropped out of college and got a job as a chauffeur to an old-school Hollywood producer. My main responsibility was to drive him around town, but he would take me to his meetings and introduce me as his associate. And he would encourage me to speak up.

He had a script that he was developing at 20th Century Fox. We had many meetings there. After two years of chauffeuring, I wrote to the Fox executive I had grown to know during those script meetings and told him I was looking for something new.

Not realising that I was this producer's driver, the executive set up an interview for me with the president of the studio as a candidate for a job as the newest studio executive.

To my surprise, when the president of the studio found out I had dropped out of college, we got into a debate about the importance of college degrees. It ended with me telling him, "You kind of sound like my mother."

And he hired me.

* * *

INFAMOUS FIRST WORDS

Every year the Bulwer Lytton awards celebrate the worst first lines of unwritten books. We love this winner in the Romance category.

It seemed fair to say that her werewolfism was putting a strain on their relationship, the way she had earned the ire of the neighbors by devouring their pets and howling far past the bedtimes of their children, but bring it up to her, and she'd just snarl, "Why do you keep harping on this?" around a mouthful of the Smiths' cat.

EVA NIESSNER

Quotable Quotes

A YEAR FROM NOW, YOU'LL WISH YOU HAD STARTED TODAY.
ANONYMOUS



When you focus on the goodness in your life, you create more of it.
OPRAH WINFREY

IF WE DON'T BELIEVE IN FREE EXPRESSION FOR PEOPLE WE DESPISE, WE DON'T BELIEVE IN IT AT ALL. NOAM CHOMSKY, *linguist*

It is not enough to be industrious; so are the ants. What are you industrious about?
HENRY DAVID THOREAU, *writer*



Sometimes you will never know the value of something, until it becomes a memory.
THEODOR GEISEL, "DR SEUSS"

Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes, including you.
ANNE LAMOTT, *writer*



FEAR IS A PAIR OF HANDCUFFS ON YOUR SOUL.
FAYE DUNAWAY, *actress*



I mostly believe, deep in my bones, that life is very simply beyond description; regardless of what one makes of it, life always spills over the parameters of how anyone has chosen to define it.
CYRIL WONG, *Singaporean poet and author*

FROM TOP: BARRY KING/GETTY IMAGES. BETTMANN/CORBIS. TERRY O'NEILL/GETTY IMAGES

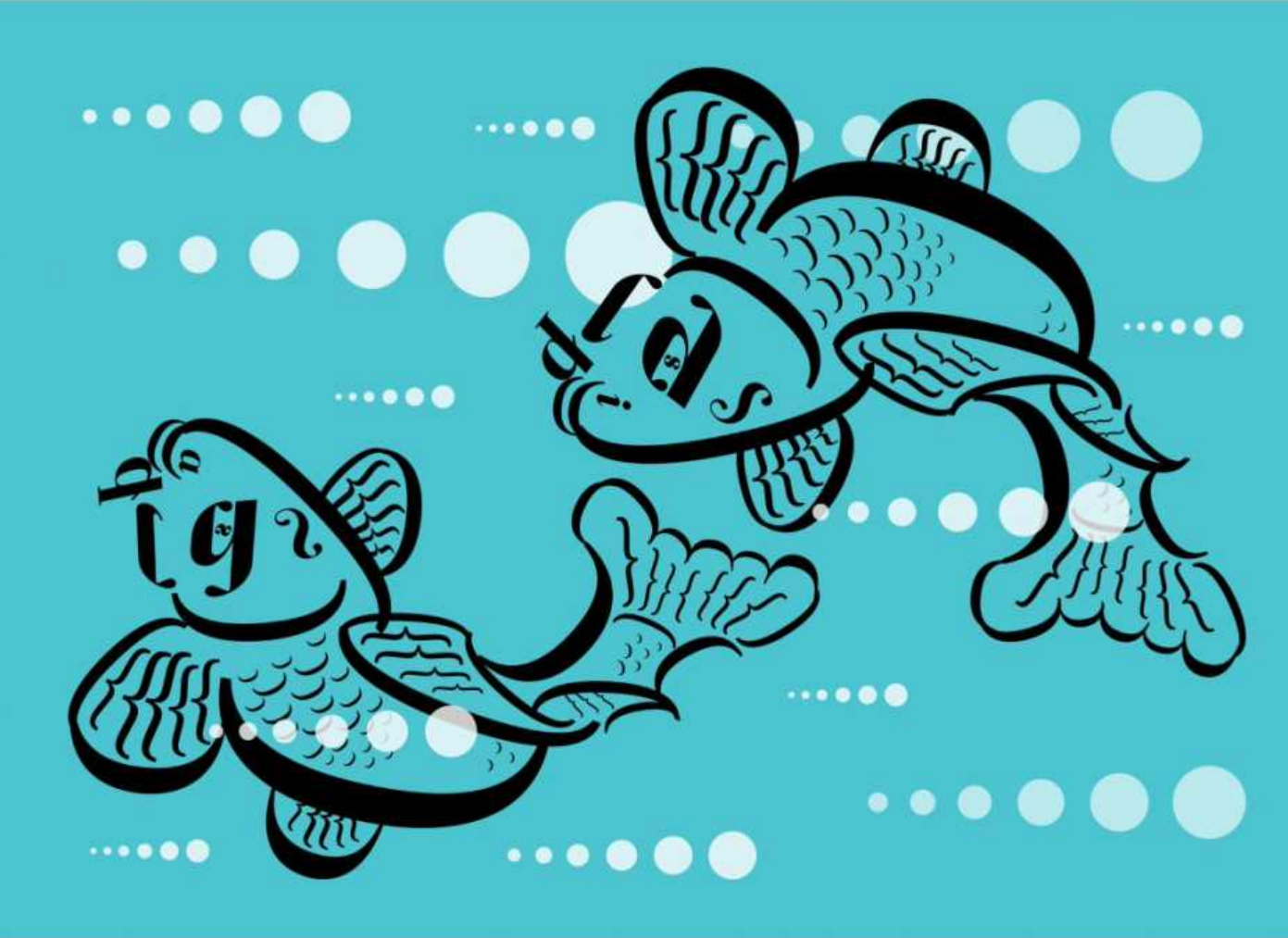
They're the words that put the whizz bang into our language, says RD chief subeditor **Donyale Harrison**

Sounds Like

WHEN I WAS MUCH YOUNGER, onomatopoeia was one of my favourite words. I loved the fact that a word that means "words that sound like natural sounds" is itself so complicated that practically no-one could guess its meaning, let alone spelling. If I'm being honest, I had a hard time even saying the wretched thing.

But, like most children, I was a keen *user* of onomatopoeia: cars went *vrooom*; dogs went *ruff ruff*; water *splish splash*. And the joy of those words remains, even though I might nowadays aim for the sophistication of a *susurrus* (whistling or rustling) or *tintinnabulation* (ringing or tinkling).

There's nothing overly mysterious about onomatopoeic words. For the most part they describe actual sounds, from the *quack* of a duck to the *whoosh* of deadlines flying by. Many


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of them are very old words: quack, like baa, moo and miaow, popped up in the Renaissance; susurrus and tintinnabulation both come from the Latin; while whoosh is newer as things only got that fast in the 19th century, and it took till the 1960s for engines to warrant a vroom.

Sometimes words become less onomatopoeic the longer they hang around: *bleat* used to be pronounced *blet*, with a long vowel, which sounds much more like the sound a sheep actually makes.

In the same way, new words pop up as the language finds a need for them; like *zhuzh*, the last-minute fancying up of an outfit that was introduced into the language by *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (more than a decade ago: I feel old!), or *bah-bow*, the tonal impersonation of a wrong answer buzzer that apparently began on an American quiz show before spreading to every teenager I know.

There's a reason onomatopoeic words are so popular: you don't really need to know their meaning in order to understand them. The first time you heard someone described as *frumpy*, the word itself gave you a sense of lumpy tiredness. Whereas the same person described as *sleekit* or *schmick* would clearly have invested in a haircut and new set of clothes, not to mention a shoe polish.

Onomatopoeia allows you to give a finer tone to the quality you are discussing than standard English. An explosion that goes *pop* is probably just a lid left on in the microwave, while one that goes *bang* is more likely to be at least errant fireworks. A *boom* will certainly do real damage and missiles *whizzing* past are definitely bad news. The sounds themselves indicate the severity of the blast.

This quality of self-explanatoriness can even work across language barriers. I had no idea what the Italian word for mosquito was, but when I saw a Roman look crossly at his arm and mutter "*Zanzara*!" it needed no translation app.

However, despite the fact that we're mostly hearing the same sounds, there are some remarkable international onomatopoeic quirks. Some sounds have surprising universality. Variants on *Shhh* and *Hahahaha* commonly convey shushing or laughter in dozens of languages.

In others, we have only minor differences: the French *plic ploc* is in fact much better than English *drip drop* for a leaking tap, while the German *plitsch platsch* suggests you should really call the plumber sooner rather than later.

But others are wildly different. Illustrator James Chapman has a wonderful website (www.chapmangamo.tumblr.com) where he shows how different languages represent different onomatopoeic words. One of my favourites is of cats: *purr* in English becomes *ronron* in French, *nurr* in Estonian, *schnurr* in German and *goro goro* in Japanese.

There are two possible explanations: either the cats have regional accents, or we're listening to them through different sets of expectations. Now the first proposition isn't wholly ridiculous. Songbirds are known to have regional song variants, as do whales, and some research suggests that domesticated animals take on aspects of the accents of the humans around them. I've patted cats around the world and there are definite cultural trends in their mannerisms.

But the *Guardian*'s Gary Nunn, who wrote a brilliant article on this topic titled "Why do pigs oink in English, boo boo in Japanese and nöff nöff in Swedish?" summed up the broader scientific argument with "it isn't pigs that are multilingual, it's us." Apparently we hear animals and other sounds through the aural "lens" of our own language.

One fact that quickly stands out in international comparisons is the unusualness of Japanese onomatopoeia. It is the only language in which a cat's miaow does not start with an M, rather, they say *nyan nyan*. Similarly, it is alone in having no Z or S sound in the word for bee noises: Japanese bees say *boon boon*.

It's no casual difference. Japanese has not one, but three types of onomatopoeia: *Giseigo*, which are the sounds of living things; *Giongo*, which are the sounds of inanimate objects; and *Gitaigo*, which is for words that mimic qualities like businesslike or quickly. Unlike English, where this class of words is often used in a less formal manner, Japanese uses them in a wider variety of contexts and more commonly. Alas, it would require a far better grasp of linguistics (and Japanese) than mine to extrapolate from this to *nyan*ing cats, but it is a good excuse to slip in that the gitaigo word for annoyed is *mukamuka*, which is clearly splendid and worth sneaking into English.

So the next time you find yourself lost for words and resort to, "She was all *growl growl* and he was all *nyah nyah*," don't bemoan your inability to remember adjectives. Celebrate the fact that your onomatopoeia is connecting you with a worldwide audience! Except, possibly, the Japanese. R

SAY IT LIKE THIS

Some apparently random onomatopoeias make far more sense when pronounced with the right accent.

Ronron: French for a cat's *purr*, it has a rolled R, a soft O and barely there N.
Nöff nöff: Swedish for a pig's *oink*, it's pronounced with a nasal vowel, like the French *neuf* (9).
Hamba: Bengali for *moo*. There's no special pronunciation: cows in Bangladesh just seem a bit more cosmopolitan than others round the world, which mostly moo.

All in a Day's Work

HUMOUR ON THE JOB



"He's cutting the workforce in half? But we can barely see over the workstation as it is."

SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

On duty as a policeman in Liverpool, UK, my brother noticed a man walking along the pavement with a portable bus stop (there were road works near the usual stop).

My brother remonstrated with him, but the man replied huffily, "I am NOT stealing it. I'm moving it closer to my house."

SUBMITTED BY HARRI LEWIS



COINCIDENCE

A little boy in my infant class came into school and told me he could spell his mum's name.

"M-U-M," he said proudly. Before I could congratulate him, another little boy said excitedly, "That's how you spell my mum's name, too!"

SUBMITTED BY PAULA MADDOCKS

BITTER MUCH?

This sign was found posted at a bookstore that was going out of business: "Sorry, no public restroom. Try amazon.com."

Source: Consumer Reports

CARTOON: SUSAN CAMILLERI KONAR; PHOTO: iSTOCK

ONE SLICE SHORT OF A LOAF

The food at the sandwich shop I frequent is good, but any deviation from the norm throws the staff. I once told the assistant that I wanted only half a sandwich. His reply: "What am I going to do with the other half?" A week later, when I told another assistant the same thing, she responded, "Do you want the top or the bottom?"

SUBMITTED BY CAROLE HOLDER

PRICES SLASHED

Here's an ad for a hedge clipper that I had to read twice: "A built-in safety switch prevents accidental starting, and blades will stop when you take one hand off."

SUBMITTED BY MICHAEL GOLDSTONE

MISCOUNTING SHEEP

My grandson lives on a farm. In one lesson his class were asked by their teacher, "If there were twelve sheep and six of them got through a hole in the fence, how many would be left?"

"None," answered Dylan, my seven-year-old grandson.

"You don't know your arithmetic," said the teacher.

"Well, you don't know your sheep," replied Dylan. "When one goes, they all go!"

SUBMITTED BY LOUISE JONES





QUICK NIBBLE

I called into a local pet shop to buy some bedding for my niece's pet rats. On entering the shop, there was a table with some samples of what looked like chocolate biscuits, and being a bit peckish – and not one to turn down a free titbit – I promptly picked one up and started munching on it as I looked for the rat department.

A young assistant approached me, and before I could ask where the rat bedding was, he informed me very pointedly that the shop was doing an offer on dog biscuit treats that week. I haven't been back since.

SUBMITTED BY PATRICIA GUYATT

Here's some advice: at a job interview, tell them you're willing to give 110 per cent. Unless the job is a statistician.

COMEDIAN ADAM GROPMAN

☛ *Got a good joke, anecdote or real-life gem to share? Send it in and you could win cash! See page 6 for details.*

I never knew how to communicate with my dad. And then, one day, I wrote him an email

Notes *From My* Father

BY DAVE COLANGELO

IT'S HARD TO TALK to dads sometimes. The roles we often expect our fathers to play – protector, provider – can make them seem impenetrable.

That's how it was with my dad. He was never much of a talker. He held his cards pretty close to his chest – so to speak, because he never gambled. He rarely drank, so we didn't get to see him loosen up after a few beers. He didn't tell stories about himself at the dinner table or when we went for walks in the park. He was a private person and seemed to want to stay that way.

Bringing up the many questions I had about life before I was born – his early hopes and dreams, loves and heartbreaks – let alone sharing my own feelings, felt like too much for us to handle. I didn't want to threaten the integrity of his hard shell. I had gotten used to it, and it made me feel secure.

But when my relationship and career simultaneously took a hit a year

ILLUSTRATION: JULIANA NEUFELD



ago, things had to change. I needed my dad to pull back the curtain so I could see him as mortal. I was facing serious questions about my own nature, and I wanted to know that he had faced them, too. I needed to know how he had found his way, because I felt like I had lost mine.

In an acute moment of desperation, it occurred to me that sending an email might be the key. An email can be crafted slowly and carefully. I could speak at a comfortable distance and give him room to adjust. He'd be up in his office – his "cubbyhole", in my mom's words – a comfy fortress of junk filled with bookshelves, dusty CD-ROMs and stacks of old newspapers. I'd be at my desk in an apartment 20 minutes away.

So I wrote to him. I told him about my regrets and fears, and I asked him to answer, if he felt like it, and to share something about himself, something that would give me much-needed perspective on both of our lives.

Two weeks later, it showed up in my inbox: a scanned, three-page, point-form document with the title handwritten in my father's distinctive all caps: "GIRLS I LIKED, BY LUIGI C." Dad, a 68-year-old retired network technologist and grandfather of four, had carefully considered my message, reached back into his memory and crafted a response – his history of love, longing, self-doubt, struggle and perseverance.

I learned about girl No. 1 (already one more girl than I had ever imagined), Angela Scattarelli, who used to live next door to him. "Sicilian" was written beside her name. He had "tried but never really had enough gumption" to ask her out. More than 40 years later, she still made the list.

There were girls from his days as a stock boy at a Toronto grocery store, like Michelle, an "English" cashier. Dad wrote, "When they rang the bell for bag packers, I tried to go to her first." He had his first kiss with her – after a few dates in his father's Beaumont – but lost out when she decided to reconnect with an old boyfriend. Still, progress!



He had "tried, but never had enough gumption" to ask her out. Over 40 years later, she still made the list

After a few more "English" girls, he went back to dating "paisans" [fellow Italians]. I got the sense that it must have been difficult for my dad to date outside of his culture. Even though he came to Canada at the age of ten, he had settled in an immigrant community. The few friends he had were mostly Italian, and families would spend a lot of time visiting relatives. With the "English" girls, the culture shock must have gone both ways.

Some of the Italian girls appeared as just first or last names, along with

scant details. The fates of these women ranged from comic ("Later saw her at a wedding party, married to a tall dude") to tragic ("She went back to Italy to marry; we found out later she had died in childbirth.")

Then, the final entry, No. 10: Antonietta Larocca. She got the most space, with details about how they had met ("through my Aunt Antonietta and Uncle Rocco"), what they had done (on one date, a screening of *Play It Again, Sam*) and the "many telephone calls from the Old Mill subway station after work". The list ended with an enthusiastic bullet point: "Antonietta and I prospered from our union. Here we are in 2014 and still in love!!!"

I had never doubted my parents' bond. It was there in the kiss they shared when exchanging Christmas cards (the only kiss we'd get to witness all year) or in the way they could smile at something the other had said, even while arguing. But it was seeing their love in writing, *his* writing – and in the context of a life that could have followed one of the many roads not taken on Dad's list – that gave me courage.

I closed the email and started to cry. I cried because I wished I had opened up earlier but was grateful it wasn't too late, and because I thought I knew him and now realised there was so much I hadn't discovered. I cried because it felt as if I hadn't been able to ask him anything of consequence about his life in all this time; instead, I had focused on not sharing anything about myself with him. I cried because at 33, in the midst of my own struggles, his letter instantly put me at ease. And I cried because in the end, it was so simple: I just had to hit "Send".

We've since had many exchanges. I've asked about his childhood and his relationship with his own parents. Some days I can even ask my dad questions face to face without getting a lump in my throat. Better yet, he occasionally offers up stories without me asking, like the one about the time he and his friend Antonio skipped school to see a movie (they got caught when Antonio spilled the beans).

And I'm talking more, too. My problems haven't been magically solved, but getting to know my dad better – and learning to love him more – has made the tough stuff more manageable and life sweeter.

It's hard to talk to dads sometimes. I'm glad that I found a way to talk to mine. R

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SHELL SELECTION

I went to a bookshop and asked the woman for a book about turtles. She asked: "Hardback?" and I was like: "Yeah, and little heads." **MARK SIMMONS,** UK COMEDIAN



How the creation of an artificial flavouring forever changed how we eat

The Secret Life of VANILLA

BY MARK SCHATZKER FROM *THE DORITO EFFECT: THE SURPRISING NEW TRUTH ABOUT FOOD AND FLAVOR*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DOMINIQUE LAFOND

THE FOURTH TIME HANK KAESTNER visited Madagascar, he got stuck in a lift. Kaestner always visited in spring; he always stayed at the Hilton; and over those four visits, the hotel lift performed very much like the nation's economy. The first three times, it had run smoothly; now it was stuck. To lovers of milkshakes, chocolate, ice-cream and cake icing, this was grave news.

Kaestner was a spice buyer for McCormick & Company, a profession as glamorous as spying but with better food. One week he might fly to Brazil to buy a few tons of cloves; the next he'd go on an allspice expedition in the Mexican jungle and get swarmed by killer bees. He once held a private meeting with the king of Tonga. Kaestner loved his job for two reasons: he loved spices and he loved the amazing places they grew. And among all of those places, Madagascar was special because of what grew there: vanilla, which Kaestner calls "the most magical spice".

Now the island nation was in trouble. The problems started in February 1975, when the president of Madagascar was assassinated. Less than a year later, the country's new leader, a military man named Didier Ratsiraka, nationalised banks and industries and declared the country a Marxist republic. Within months, embassies were closed and tourism shrivelled. At the formerly luxurious Hilton, there were burnt-out light bulbs in the lobby and North Koreans, brought in to do security, walking the hallways.

Vanilla production was devastated. By 1979, Madagascar was exporting just over a quarter as much vanilla as it had in 1976. Back in his office at McCormick headquarters in Baltimore, Maryland, Kaestner received a package containing photos of a great swath of cured vanilla beans being crushed by a steamroller. The government was destroying its buffer stock. It wanted the price to go even higher. It doubled.

This was distressing news for McCormick. Vanilla was a major profit centre. The company could make as much money off a few hundred tons of vanilla beans as it could from 10,000 tons of black pepper. Everyone loves vanilla. Nothing improves cake icing or lifts French toast like a few dark drops of pure vanilla extract. It's flavouring royalty: better than caramel, better than almond and better than toffee.

> WAS THERE AN EASIER WAY TO MAKE VANILLA? THE ANSWER WAS INGENIOUSLY SIMPLE: FOOL PEOPLE

Everything about vanilla extract was perfect except for one thing: the price. Even under non–Marxist republic conditions, the stuff was expensive. Making it requires cultivating vanilla orchids, pollinating the blossoms by hand, waiting for the beans [actually seed pods] to ripen, picking them at just the right time, boiling them in water, "sweating" them in hot chests or tanks, setting them out every morning to bake in the sun until they're dried, then conditioning them in closed boxes for months.

At this point, the beans – which are now as moist as a raisin and as long and dark as a cigarillo – are shipped to Europe, then to New York and then to an extraction plant, where they're chopped into tiny pieces and alcohol is passed over them continuously in a process of steeping that can take more than a day. Finally, the brew is held for weeks so it can settle. It takes a year and a half to go from orchid blossom to extract, 30g of which costs as much as a shot of good single-malt whisky.

Now there was a dark cloud hanging over vanilla. Prices were going up. Supply was dwindling. A home gourmet or a high-end pastry chef might tolerate expensive extract, but McCormick had customers who produced ice cream, yoghurt, beverages, chocolate and pastries and ordered huge quantities of vanilla extract. What were they going to do?

In 1978, two years after Kaestner got trapped in that lift, McCormick asked a question: is there an easier way to make vanilla? There was. And the answer, though spectacularly complex, was also ingeniously simple: fool people.

ONE HUNDRED AND SEVEN YEARS earlier, a German chemist at the Frederick William University (now the Humboldt University of Berlin) had asked the same question. Wilhelm Haarmann possessed a strange interest in pine cones. He believed they were hiding a secret: the potential to produce an almost magical white powder that could make pastries, drinks and chocolate taste better.

The powder itself was no secret. It had been discovered years earlier by a Frenchman who had purified and filtered vanilla extract until he'd been left with a crystalline substance that smelled potently of vanilla. The new substance became known as vanillin (pronounced VAN-illin). But then, for nearly two decades, nothing. The mystery of vanilla was no longer a mystery, but no-one could do much about it because vanillin could be made only from vanilla extract. And since vanilla extract was already expensive, vanillin was said to be worth more than its weight in gold.

Haarmann, however, knew something others didn't. Years earlier, in his hometown of Holzminden, a pharmacist had been experimenting with a substance he'd scraped from the inner bark of pine trees. He filtered, pressed, boiled down and purified the gooey material until he was left with crystals he described as "white, silky-sheened, very delicate". When the pharmacist squirted acid on these crystals, an extraordinary reaction took place. The air became perfumed with vanilla.

Was it possible to produce this precious and exotic substance from something as ordinary as pine trees? Haarmann got his hands on the pharmacist's remaining stash of pine crystals and, in his laboratory, pulled

off a chemistry miracle. He turned pine crystals into vanillin.

In 1875, after collecting 20kg of pine cones in the Black Forest, Haarmann opened Haarmann's Vanillinfabrik. What had formerly been the exclusive domain of a tropical orchid was now being produced in a factory in Germany. Pine cones went in one end, and vanillin came out the other. Haarmann's company would eventually figure out how to make vanillin from clove oil, which was even cheaper, and would go on to manufacture a synthetic flavouring found in violets that is still used to create fruit flavours. His flavour business grew to be so successful that Holzminden became known as the City of Fragrances.

> MUCH OF WHAT WE THINK OF AS FLAVOUR IS AROMA. THE NOSE'S GREATEST TALENT IS RECOGNISING THE VALUE OF FLAVOUR

THAT PROBABLY SOUNDS ODD. A city that makes flavours becoming famous for fragrances. That's because so much of what we think of as flavour is actually aroma – scent, bouquet, odour and so on. A great deal of what characterises the food we love is no more substantial than perfume. And it is explained by a phenomenon known as "retronasal olfaction"– or back-of-the-nose smelling.

Retronasal olfaction happens when an aroma enters your nose not through your nostrils but through your throat. It is fundamentally different from nostril smelling, engaging other parts of the brain. Of all the senses, it is both the most intense and, curiously, the most unknown. Almost no-one has any idea that the nose's greatest talent is appreciating flavour. (The people who come closest are wine aficionados.)

This is how it works: when you eat food, the combination of chewing and heat releases "volatile aromatic compounds" – wafting food vapours, basically, like the ones you see emanating from burbling pots and grilling steaks in vintage cartoons. As you eat, these aromatic gases float up or are exhaled into the nasal cavity (situated above the roof of your mouth), the ceiling of which is dappled with microscopic pouches that catch odours.

These pouches are so tiny that whole molecules don't fit inside them, only parts of molecules. When a receptor is "stimulated", it sends a signal through the human body's most direct conduit of nerve fibre to the olfactory bulb, an ancient-olive-shaped piece of the brain that hovers over the nasal cavity as though it, too, is trying to get in on the smelling action.

A single molecule can have lots of different parts and, therefore,


200 ml
± 5%
250 ml
REX®

stimulate many different receptors. A single receptor, similarly, can be stimulated, to varying degrees, by different kinds of molecules. There are around 400 kinds of smell receptors, but the combination of signals – each combination represents a different aroma – is, at present, incalculably huge. But we know this much: we are capable of distinguishing more than a trillion aromas.

The brain, fortunately, is expertly talented at cataloguing them. The aromatic compounds emanating from bacon, for example, trigger a combination of smell receptors that a person remembers as "bacon". When that person walks into a snack bar at 9am and is struck by the scent wafting off of the sizzling flat-top grill, it sets off an experience that is as much analytical as it is emotional: "bacon".

When it comes to sensing food aromas, the human tongue is as useful as the big toe. If you plug your nose and dump an ounce of vanillin on your tongue, you will taste only a very mild bitter flavour. It's not until you inhale through your mouth and then exhale through your nose and vanillin molecules reach the nasal cavity that the silky tropical scent tingles your brain.

The tongue is far from useless, however. It senses what are called the "basic tastes": sweet, salty, sour, bitter and *umami* (savoury). Actually, it isn't just the tongue. There are taste receptors on the roof of your mouth and in your throat. Sweet things, like sugar, stimulate sweet taste receptors, which produce the universal pleasure known as sweetness. Acids stimulate sour receptors. And that's how it works for bitter, salty and umami.

The flavour industry has not forgotten about the tongue. The discovery of umami rivals vanillin for its influence on the food business. That happened in 1908, when a Japanese chemist named Kikunae Ikeda wondered what it was that gave *dashi* (a Japanese fish stock) an irresistible savoury quality. After manipulating seaweed through aqueous extraction, he discovered the fish stock's inner secret: a crystalline substance called glutamic acid. The next year, Ikeda began producing a commercial form of glutamic acid known as monosodium glutamate under the brand name Aji-no-moto. Today, Ajinomoto Group is the world's leading producer of MSG (not to mention a whole lot of seasonings), and it's worth more than the company Haarmann co-founded, which is now called Symrise.

It might be conceptually helpful to separate taste and aroma to understand how flavour works, but it is the combination of the two that we find so stirring. Without the mouth, food is nothing more than a fleeting scent. And without the nose, it's dismally simple. When a person eats bacon, receptors in the mouth sense saltiness, sweetness and umami, while the nose senses its sweet, roasty, smoky, porky volatiles. In the mind, they combine to

form a blend that is vivid and inseparable – and deeply pleasurable.

BY THE MID-'70S, the world was awash in Haarmann's wonder powder. Vanillin was cheap, it stored easily, and it didn't come from a politically unstable former French colony. Everything about vanillin was perfect except for one thing: quality.

Vanillin may have been vanilla's biggest secret, but it was by no means its only secret. Vanilla contains hundreds of other aromatic compounds. Not a single one of these comes anywhere close to the dominance or likeability of vanillin, and some of them don't smell very vanilla-like on their own. These notes include "woody," "rummy," "smoky" and "watermelon". They are, nevertheless, essential to the experience of authentic vanilla. They give it what flavour scientists refer to as "depth," "structure," "body" and "dimension". On its own, vanillin is a blast of sweet candy floss – fun but simple, a good-looking dimwit.

> THE REAL MONEY WAS IN COMPLEXITY. IN 1978, MCCORMICK SET ITS SIGHTS ON CREATING "COMPLEX" FAKE VANILLA

By the late '70s, with Madagascar now in the business of destroying its own vanilla beans, vanillin, however simple, was starting to look like a pretty good option. For McCormick, the situation was bad. It wasn't much of a flavour company; it was mainly an herb and spice company, which it still is today. It dabbled here and there with chemical flavourings, but it was a pipsqueak compared to multinational flavour behemoths like Givaudan, Haarmann & Reimer and International Flavors & Fragrances, which could pump out huge quantities of vanillin.

Vanillin was a commodity. The real money was in true vanilla extract. The real money was in complexity. And that's what the company set out to achieve. In 1978, McCormick set its sights on "complex" fake vanilla.

The project team featured a young food technologist named Marianne Gillette, who had a Master's in Nutrition from the University of California, Davis. In one room, Gillette assembled a "trained descriptive panel" of expert sniffers and tasters who specialised in identifying flavour notes in food. They sniffed and tasted pure vanilla extract and scribbled down notes, which Gillette then took to a flavourist – a professional concocter of flavour chemicals – who pulled out bottles filled with the exact synthetic matches of "vanillin," "woody" and "rummy" and blended them. A day later, the sensory panel would convene again. Gillette would have them compare the



latest fake vanilla with pure extract, and the sensory panel would proceed to rip into it.

After two years, the flavourist's artificial vanilla started smelling like a pretty good match for real vanilla, but

> IT WOULD TAKE JUST 96 GRAMS OF RESINOUS TO GIVE NIAGARA FALLS A LEATHERY NOTE FOR AN HOUR

something was missing. There was a gaping aromatic hole in the middle of fake vanilla. The professional sniffers called it "resinous". Gillette came back to the flavourist and said, "There's not enough resinous." And here the flavourist drew a blank. There was no match in her arsenal of flavour chemicals. Just what the heck was "resinous", anyway? The panel described it as "leathery".

IT WAS TIME for gas chromatography. This ominous pair of words is the name of the technology that blew the flavour door off its hinges in the '50s. Before gas chromatography, there was no good way to separate out, for example, the multitude of aromas in vanilla. Beyond vanillin and perhaps a few others, flavour scientists could only stare in wonder at a bottle of extract. With gas chromatography, you could put a drop of extract in a machine (a gas chromatograph), and over the next couple of hours, the individual compounds would come marching out the other end. The machine even produced a printout that displayed each chemical as a peak. A big peak meant there was a lot of that particular chemical, and a tiny peak meant there wasn't much at all.

By the time of the resinous mystery, McCormick had already analysed the bejesus out of vanilla and used the results to create a chemical "map" of the flavours inside. But the sensory panel's resinous finding was a revelation, nonetheless. The map was incomplete. Somewhere in vanilla's chromatogram, there was a small peak everyone had been missing.

This time, instead of scouring the printout for peaks, the flavourist pulled up a stool next to the gas chromatograph. As each compound came out the other end – woody, beeswax, rummy, smoky – she sniffed, careful not to burn her nose on the hot gas, hoping resinous would eventually appear. For nearly an hour, there wasn't so much as a peep. Then, a fleeting, leathery wisp. Resinous. They checked the printout. The peak was so small it looked more like a valley.

But for resinous, the jig was up. A McCormick chemist named Patrick Hoffman cranked the sensitivity on the gas chromatograph way up and

ran the vanilla profile over and over. He got different flavourists – some male, some female – to sniff the output. The suspect was apprehended. Once resinous had been captured in a bottle, McCormick identified its chemical make-up using a different technology called mass spectrometry, which deduces unknown substances by measuring, among other things, their mass-to-charge ratio, which includes the molecular weight. (It's like trying to figure out what's inside a mysterious suitcase by heaving it off of a hotel balcony.)

And boy, was resinous ever potent. According to Hoffman, who would go on to become McCormick's director of technical sciences and is now retired, it would take just 96g of resinous to give Niagara Falls a discernible leathery note for an hour.

It wasn't long before McCormick was in the resinous business. In 1982, four years after Gillette and her colleagues first set out to crack the vanilla secret and six years after Hank Kaestner got stuck in that lift, McCormick began selling Imitation Vanilla Flavor.

Whereas vanilla extract featured hundreds of compounds, Imitation Vanilla Flavor had around 30, and not one of them was made from vanilla beans. Vanilla had been chemically decapitated and its production outsourced from Madagascar to suburban Baltimore. Only the chemists knew about it. To a person licking an ice-cream cone, it tasted exactly the same. According to Gillette and every member of her sensory panel, it was a "perfect match" to pure Madagascar vanilla extract. Industry agreed. Many customers switched to Imitation Vanilla Flavor and never switched back, even when the price of real vanilla came back down.

> IN 1965, THERE WERE FEWER THAN 700 OF THESE FLAVOURING CHEMICALS. TODAY THERE ARE OVER 2200

A century after Wilhelm Haarmann stepped into that German forest, a fantasy that began with pine cones was realised. Fake vanilla was cheap and available by the litre – and it didn't taste fake anymore.

AND THAT, ladies and gentlemen, is how industry has accomplished what you might call the great flavour migration. One after another, humans have captured the chemicals that characterise foods like apples, cherries, carrots and beef and moved their production from plants and animals to factories.

In 1965, there were fewer than 700 of

these chemicals. Today, there are over 2200. Recent additions are "mustard horseradish wasabi" or 2-(methyl thio) ethyl acetate; "raw potato" (2-ethoxy-3-ethylpyrazine); and "balsamic" (Sclareol). But don't think of it as a list. It's more like a vocabulary, because these chemicals are mixed and blended in almost endless combinations to produce knock-offs that keep getting more complex, layered and convincing.

None of it would have happened without gas chromatography. The first commercial gas chromatograph unit went on sale in 1955, and soon delta-dodecalactone, which had been found in butter, was being added to margarine. A "green note" called leaf alcohol paved the way to better fake strawberry, a flavour that got even more convincing in 1964 with the addition of a sweet-smelling substance called Furaneol. That same year, nootkatone was discovered in grapefruit, and by 1970 the Coca-Cola Company was adding the compound to flavour Fresca.

The age of human-made flavour had dawned. It was now possible to fool people into experiencing mintiness without a single leaf of mint. You could create the vivid sensation of passion-fruit with just a few drops of liquid. In 1986, the chemical secret of hazelnuts was out of the bag, and five years after that, white truffles lost their historic monopoly on 2,4,6-trithiaheptane (the "vanillin" of northern Italy's rarest and most expensive ingredient).

For thousands of years, the flavour of orange could be experienced only via the seasonal, perishable spheres of fibre, juice, vitamins, minerals and antioxidants called oranges. Now you could order "orange" by phone and add it to soft drinks, yoghurt or gum. Name any food – raspberries, chicken, pineapples, tomatoes, blueberries, even tacos – and there were chemicals that imitated it. R

THE DORITO EFFECT: THE SURPRISING NEW TRUTH ABOUT FOOD AND FLAVOR © 2015 BY MARK SCHATZKER, PUBLISHED BY SIMON & SCHUSTER

* * *

ROOM WITH NO VIEW

Cut through travel-agent patter with this handy jargon buster:

Says: We would strongly recommend hiring a car.
Means: You're 85km from the nearest lavatory.

Says: Plenty of nightlife. **Means:** Watch out for the cockroaches.

Says: Staggering views. **Means:** The local wine's dodgy. ISIHAC.ORG.UK

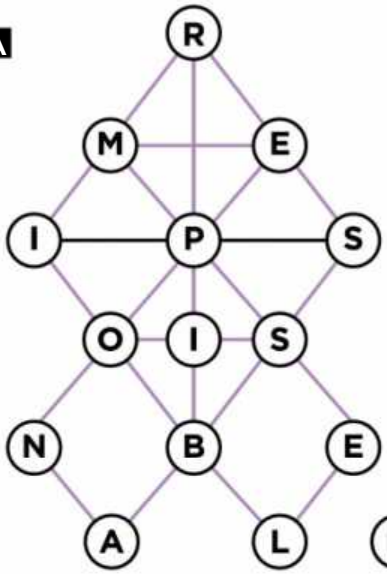
BONUS PUZZLES & GAMES SECTION

HELP KEEP YOUR BRAIN IN TOP SHAPE WITH THESE BRAIN GAMES – THE PERFECT MIX OF WORD, NUMBER AND PICTURE PUZZLES THAT ALL THE FAMILY CAN ENJOY!

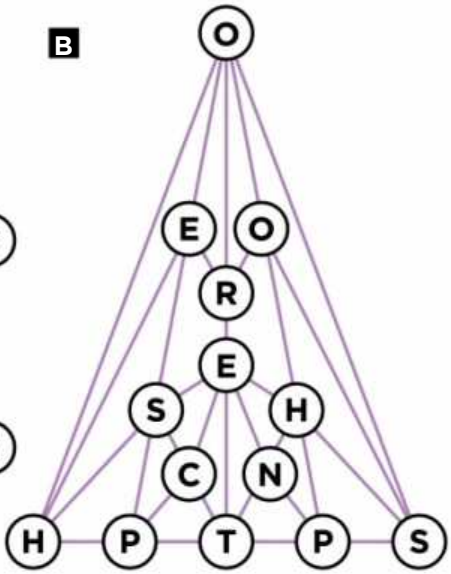
NETWORDS

In each of these puzzles, work from letter to letter to spell out a 14-letter word. Every letter must be used once and once only, and each consecutive letter in a word must be connected by a line. TIP: it can be easier to start at the end!

A

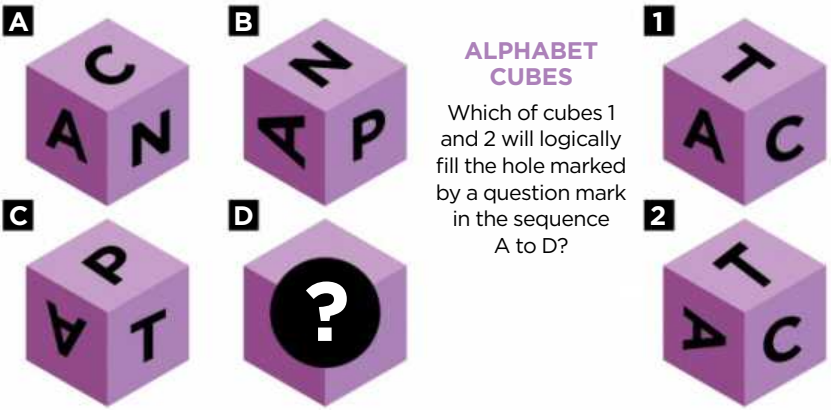


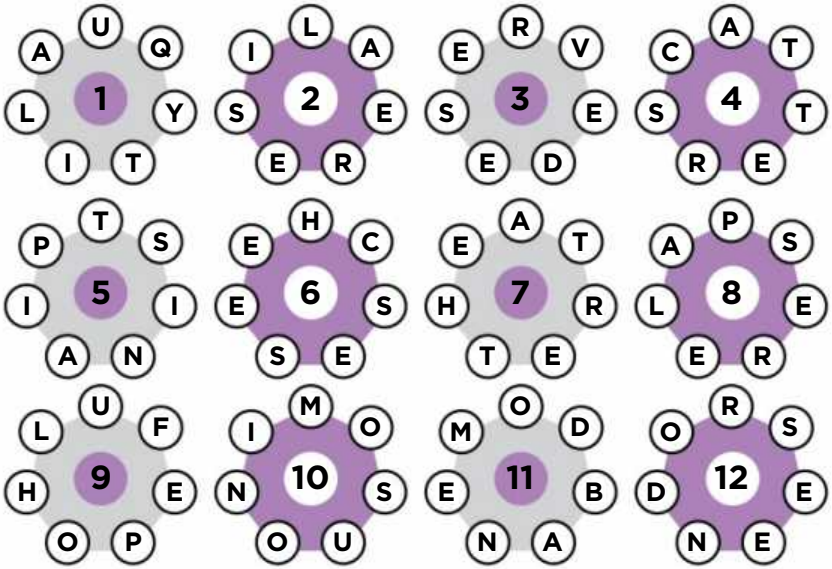
B



ALPHABET CUBES

Which of cubes 1 and 2 will logically fill the hole marked by a question mark in the sequence A to D?





CIRCLE-GRAMS

Each circle of letters forms a word. Can you work out what they are? Some flow clockwise, some flow anticlockwise: the trick is figuring out where to begin.

Not on the earth,
not in the sky,

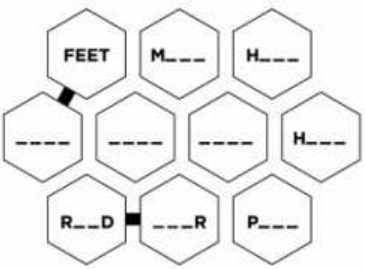
I'm always far away;
for when

You have arrived
at where I lie

I've moved away
too far again

RIDDLE ME

Find the answer to this classic riddle.



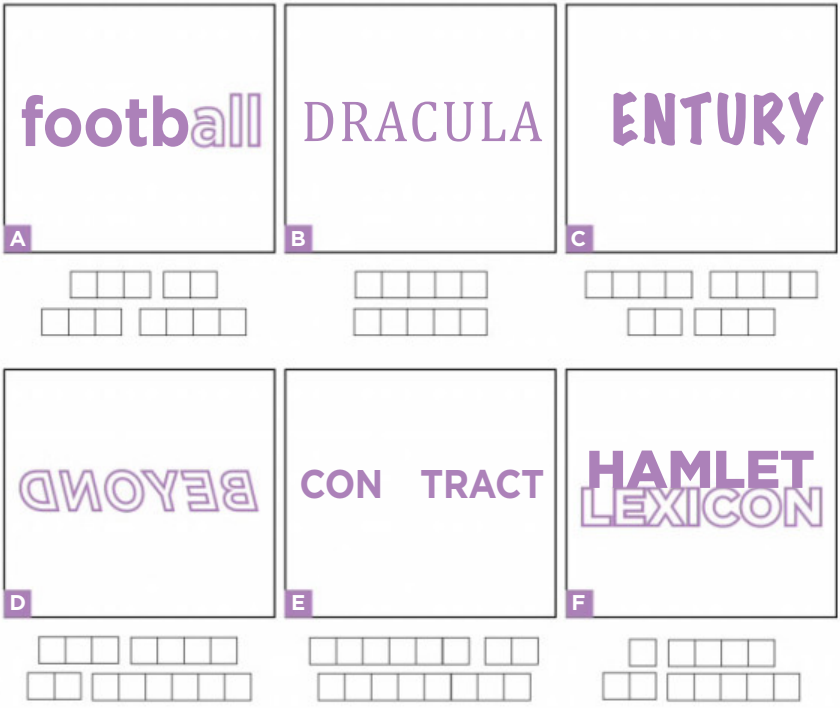
WORD WORM

Create a single continuous loop of four letter words by filling in the missing letters and joining the hexagons. Each pair of joined words must differ by only one letter and every hexagon must be joined to only two others.

A	ARROW.....LINE	B	PART.....PIECE
C	NOTE.....KEEPER	D	WIND.....OUT
E	UNDER.....STAND	F	FEED.....STOP
G	SWEET.....FLAKE	H	MASTER.....SET

MIND THE GAP

Find a four-letter word that fits between each pair of words below so that it forms common compound words with both the first and second words in each set.

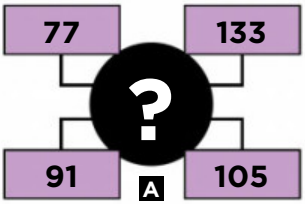


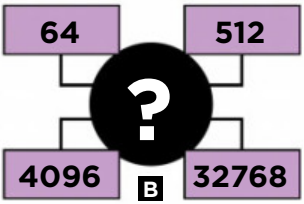
HIDDEN MEANING

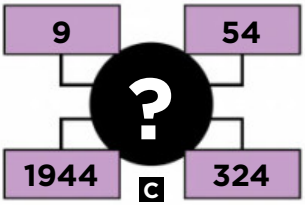
Identify the common words or phrases above.

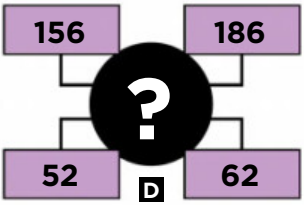
MISING LINK

Each set (A, B, C and D) contains numbers that are related to each other in some way. Can you work out what the relationship is for each and supply the missing number marked by a question mark in each set?









ROUTE 40

Find your way from 1 to 40 in exactly 40 moves. You can move horizontally or vertically, but not diagonally. Your route must include each of the numbers from 1 to 40 once each, but they can occur in any order you like.

1	25	21	31	9	13	10	15	12	6
31	13	25	12	32	19	36	16	3	38
5	17	36	11	29	33	25	38	29	10
2	8	24	26	27	23	16	30	20	20
11	19	37	34	8	21	14	20	14	17
37	5	7	12	25	23	39	37	3	13
4	21	18	24	22	6	7	18	2	38
35	30	33	11	10	6	5	35	28	10
6	35	28	21	27	18	15	25	4	40

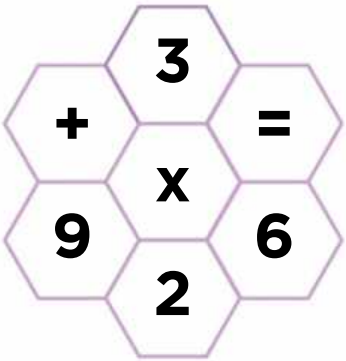


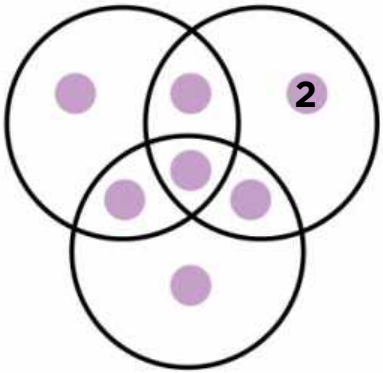
BALANCING ACT

Each different colour ball represents a different whole-kilogram value weight. Find a solution that will balance out the final scale using the fewest balls.

HEXAGON

Create two equations of matching value using the digits and symbols in the hexagons below. The elements of each equation should be in adjoining cells.



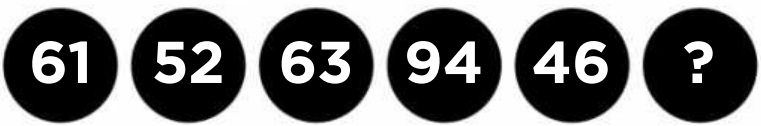


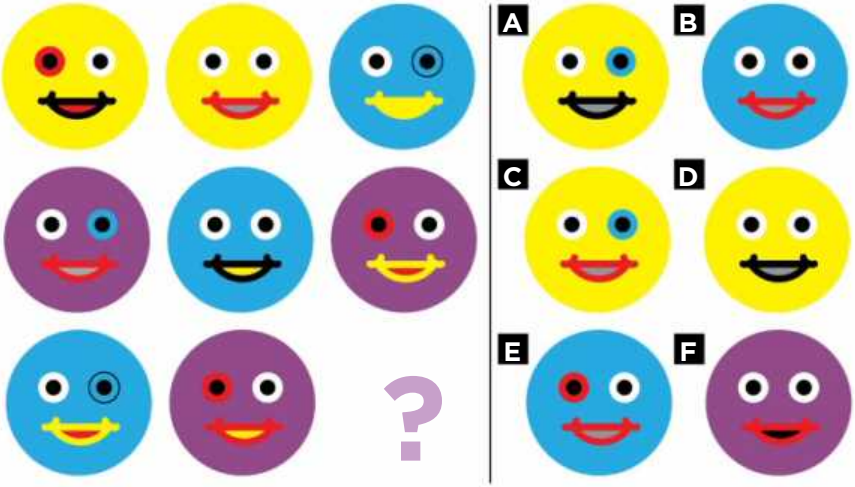
THREE RING CIRCUS

Fill in the purple circles with the numbers 1 to 7, using each number once only and in such a way that the total of the numbers enclosed by each ring is 18.

SEQUENCE

Think laterally to find out which number should replace the question mark as the final digit in this set.



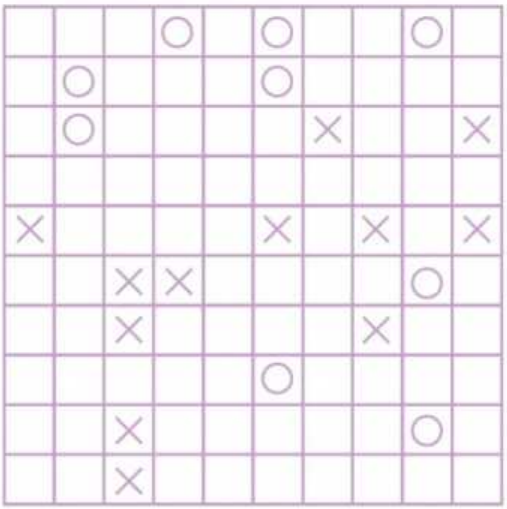


SMILEY FACES

To complete the set on the left, which of the smiley faces labelled A to F should replace the question mark?

BINNOXO

In this puzzle, all you need to do is fill in the grid with Os and Xs. Easy! Except there must be no more than two consecutive Os or Xs in any row or column. Each row and column must have an equal number of Os and Xs. And the sequence of Os and Xs is unique in every row and every column. Good luck!





DOG YEARS

In five years' time, the combined age of my dogs will be 40 years. What will be their combined age in two years' time?





WHEEL OF FORTUNE

Two labels have gone missing on the wheel. What colour and what value should appear at these two positions? You'll find it easier if you work your way around the wheel in a clockwise direction.

CAN I HAVE YOUR NUMBER?

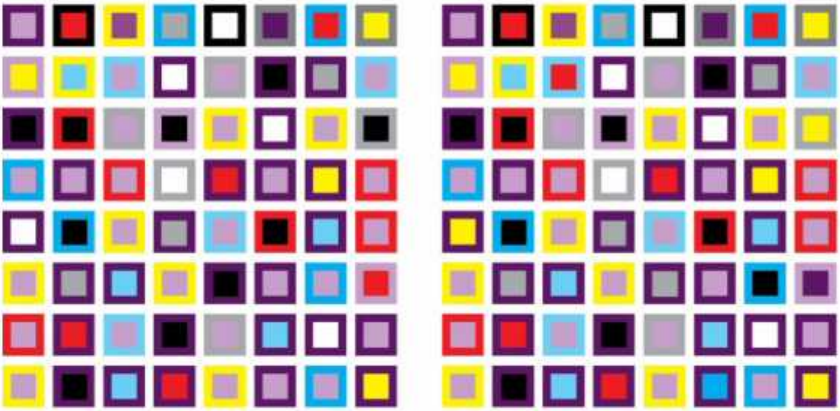
Paul wants Clara's phone number. Can you work it out from her clues?

- My number contains all of the digits 0 to 9. Each digit only appears once.
- The last three are in ascending order.
- The seventh digit is nine more than the first digit.
- The fifth digit is four times the third digit.
- The fourth digit is three times the second digit.
- The ninth and tenth digits add up to eleven.

NUMBER CRUNCH

Can you find the logic governing this sequence? What should the next number (indicated by a question mark) in the list be? And why?

2	4	8	14	22	32	44	?

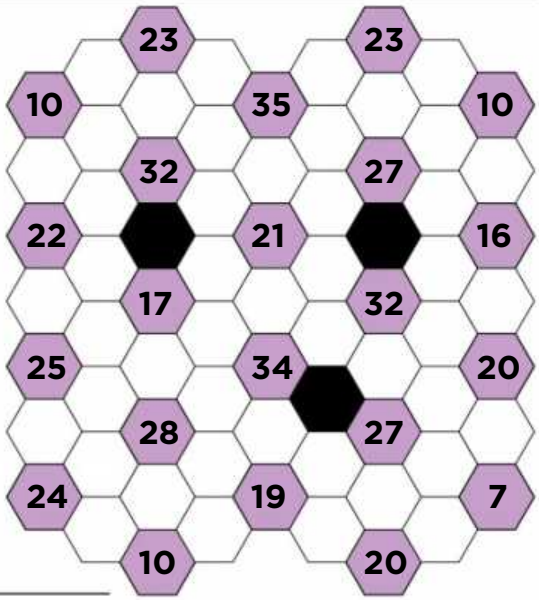


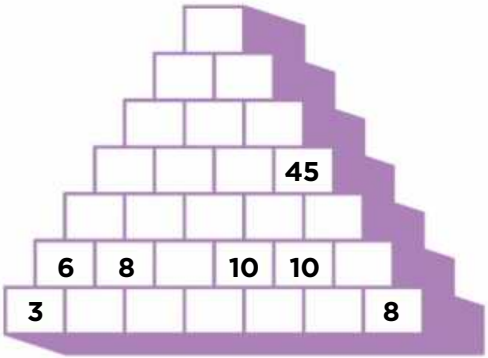
SPOT THE DIFFERENCE

Can you spot the seven differences between these two images?

HONEYCOMBS

Fill in the white cells using numbers 1 to 9. The number in each of the lilac cells must be the sum of the numbers in the white cells immediately bordering it. A number can appear once only in the white cells bordering any given lilac cell.





BUILDING BLOCKS

The number in each block in this pyramid is equal to the sum of the numbers in the two blocks immediately below it. Can you fill in all of the missing numbers? All the numbers in the bottom row are single-digit numbers.

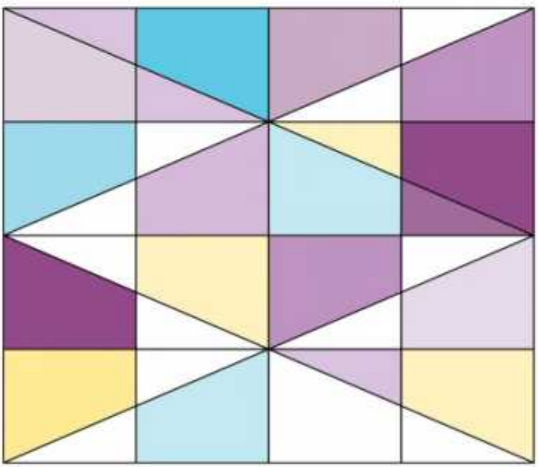
SHARED FEATURE

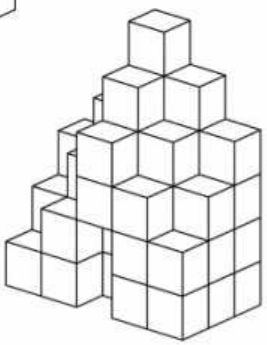
What do these words have in common?

DOCUMENTARY **PERSONALITY** **SUBORDINATE**

TRIANGLE HUNT

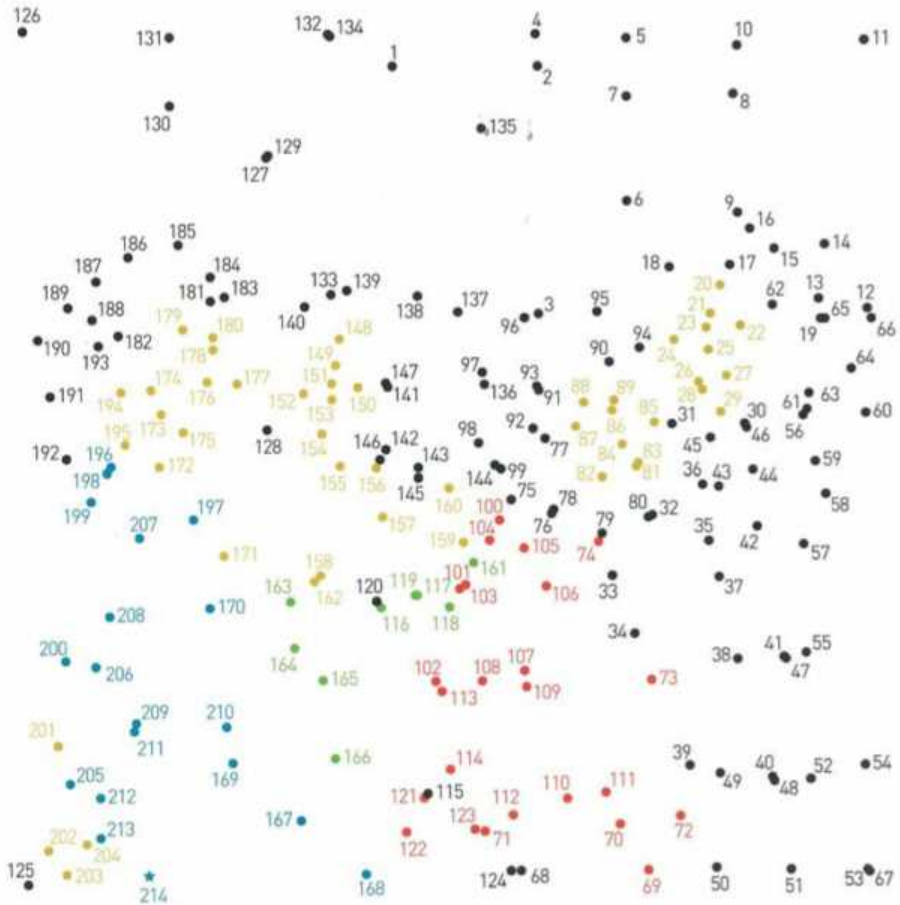
How many triangles can you find? Note that a triangle can be made up of smaller segments, including other triangles.





CUBE COUNT

How many cubes are there in the stack above? Some rows of cubes may continue, unseen, behind others, but you can see every cavity.



DOT-TO-DOT

Connect the dots in the numbered order for each coloured set, using pens that are the same colour as the dots themselves (change on the dot that introduces a new colour). You may be able to tell what the picture is well before you're finished.

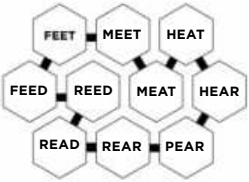
NETWORDS
A. IMPRESSIONABLE B. PHOSPHORESCENT

ALPHABET CUBES
2. With each step, the cube is rotated in such a way that the side facing upwards becomes the the side facing backwards and to the left (which is not visible).

CIRCLE-GRAMS
1. QUALITY 2. REALISE 3. DESERVE 4. SCATTER 5. PIANIST 6. CHEESES 7. THEATRE 8. RELAPSE 9.HOPEFUL 10. OMINOUS 11. ABDOMEN 12. ENDORSE

RIDDLE ME
THE HORIZON

MIND THE GAP
A. HEAD B. TIME
C. BOOK D. FALL
E. HAND F. BACK
G. CORN
H. MIND

WORD WORM


HIDDEN MEANING
A.All in the game B. Blood count C. Long time no see D. The back of beyond E. Breach of contract F. A play on words

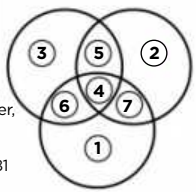
MISSING LINK
A. 7 – All of the numbers are multiple of 7.
B. 8 – 8^2 8^3 8^4 8^5
C. 6 – Starting from the number at the top left, multiplication by 6 results in the next number going clockwise.
D. 3 – Dividing the two numbers on top by 3 gives the two numbers on the bottom.

ROUTE 40

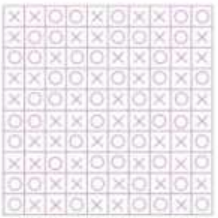

BALANCING ACT
Black = 1kg; purple = 2kg; blue = 3kg and lilac = 4kg. Two possible answers: 2 lilac + 1 purple, or 1 lilac + 2 blue.

HEXAGON
2 x 6 = 3 + 9
or 9 + 3 = 6 x 2

SEQUENCE
18. This is a sequence of square numbers starting with the number 16. However, the digits of each number have been reversed. The missing number would be 81 written backwards, i.e. '18'.

THREE RING CIRCUS


SMILEY FACES
D. Think in groups of three to find the solution. So, the end result is that three of the faces are purple, three blue and three yellow; three faces have two white eyes, three have one red and one white eye and three have one blue and one white eye.Three of the faces have a yellow mouth, three have a red mouth and three have a grey mouth. Finally, three of the faces have yellow lips, three have red lips, and three have black lips.

BINOXXO


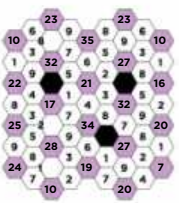
DOG YEARS
25 YEARS. At present, the dogs' combined age is 15 (40-25 (5 dogs x 5 years)). In two years, their combined age will be 10 years more than it is now.

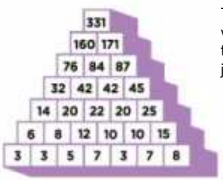
WHEEL OF FORTUNE
Yellow JOKER at the top, dark purple 100 at the bottom. Moving around the wheel in a clockwise direction, the "Joker" advances by one position in each quarter, while the numbers remain in the same order.

CAN I HAVE YOUR NUMBER?
Clara's phone number: 012 387 9456

NUMBER CRUNCH
58. The number being added each time is the next member of an ascending sequence of even numbers (plus2, plus 4 , plus 6, plus 8, plus 10, plus 12, plus 14)

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE


HONEYCOMBS


BUILDING BLOCKS


SHARED FEATURE
They are all isograms; a word in which each of the letters used appears just once.

TRIANGLE HUNT
There are 66 triangles.

CUBE COUNT
There are 49 cubes.

DOT-TO-DOT
The dot-to-dot reveals a cityscape and pedestrians.

Smart Animals

If you think that being romantic is a trait that only humans possess, these animals may teach you a thing or two

The German Shepherd Who Played Cupid

NICHOLAS ORDINANS

I have been adopting rescued German Shepherd dogs since 1953 when, as a three-year-old, I fell in love with Rex, who lived on the farm where my father worked.

Years later, when I was temporarily working in security, my father rescued a small female German Shepherd he found lying on the side of the road with a length of wire embedded in her neck. Her black and tan coat was matted and neglected and the ends of her canines sawn off. I named her Toska and soon discovered that this brutal treatment had made her distrustful of people as she would act aggressively to anyone who approached her.



For the first six months of our life together I was forced to walk her on the edge of the pavement to stop her lunging at anyone who walked by. However, she responded to care and affection and became a very successful security patrol dog, working with me. But she would still bare her teeth and snarl at anyone who approached her too closely.

Eventually I went back to being a zoo keeper. Toska would spend the day in a friend's garden in the zoo staff accommodation area. One evening while I was collecting Toska after work, I was approached by a very attractive young lady from the bird section. She told me she had been admiring Toska and wondered if she might pat her. I explained Toska's history and temperament and regretfully refused. Obviously sensing both my attraction to this young lady and my uncertainty about making the initial approach, Toska overcame both her own fears and my timidity. She dragged me across the gap that separated us and thoroughly licked my beloved, future wife on the cheek.

Toska had never reacted this way before



and would never do so again for the remainder of the seven wonderful years I was privileged to know her. She continued to be affectionate toward my wife and the two remained lifelong friends.

Love Cats

MARGARET POLETTI

A few years ago, after a hard day at the office I arrived home to discover the back door was open. Alarmed, I entered the house to find Snowey, my white three-year-old cat, snuggled on the couch with a strange black male cat. Twenty minutes later, after kicking out the tomcat and going about my business, I heard an odd scratching sound at the back door.

On closer inspection I witnessed the "innocent" Snowey jumping up, pulling open the door handle and letting in her little boyfriend.

Three's a Crowd?

JUDE ADLER

It was so exciting – in March 2014, after dating my girlfriend for 18 months, we were finally getting married and leaving the family home. As fate would have it, though, our new home happened to be in the same suburb and just around the corner from the house where my wife's parents live.

As we settled into our new lives, we started hearing constant, regular meowing at our door most evenings. When we eventually looked out, we found to our shock that my wife's family cat, Ashy, had followed us to our new home. Thirteen-year-old Ashy has been part of my wife's family since he was a kitten and he and my wife share a special bond. He does not show much affection towards me, probably because I do not show much fondness towards him.

Still, I admire the way this cat knew where we lived or was able to find us. Although Ashy has not moved in permanently, he is a frequent visitor and loves having an alternative dinner venue. It just shows that while you can take the girl from the family, you can't take the cat away from the girl!

You could earn cash by telling us about the antics of unique pets or wildlife. Turn to page 6 for details on how to contribute.

PHOTOS: ISTOCK

BOOK DIGEST





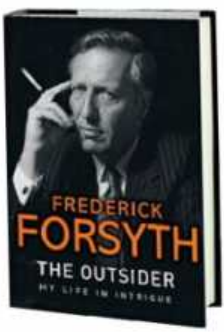
In **WENDY WHITELEY AND THE SECRET GARDEN,** (Lantern), **Janet Hawley** tells the story of how one woman transformed a neglected industrial harbourside site just a short walk from Sydney's Harbour Bridge into a sanctuary. "... When you stand at the top entrance under the sprawling boughs of the giant Moreton Bay fig tree, place your foot on the first narrow step leading down and grip the bush-branch handrail, you instantly leave the ordinary world behind.

It seems as if you've stumbled upon someone's very private world, or discovered some wonderful secret, as you glimpse the strangely enchanting garden that lies below. It looks and feels like a treasured love garden. Even if you know nothing of the history of Wendy Whiteley's alchemy, turning private grief and a disused dumpland into a Garden of Eden, you can sense the heartfelt love that's been poured into creating this cherished place."

PHOTO: iSTOCK; EXTRACTS MAY BE EDITED FOR SPACE AND CLARITY

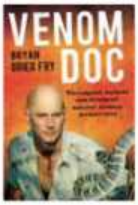


WINE TRAILS: PLAN 52 PERFECT WEEKENDS IN WINE COUNTRY (Lonely Planet)
Napa Valley, California: "... Home to some of the world's most famous and critically acclaimed wineries, today's Napa Valley is as moneyed and manicured as it gets – a far cry from the rural backwater that visitors would've discovered up until the mid-1970s. Things have never been the same since the "Judgement of Paris" tasting of 1976, when a handful of plucky upstarts pitched their wines in a blind tasting against the mightiest estates of Bordeaux and Burgundy in France. The winners in both red (Cabernet Sauvignon) and white (Chardonnay) were revealed to be from the Napa Valley – a result that shook the wine world to its foundations."



In **THE OUTSIDER: MY LIFE IN INTRIGUE** (Bantam Press) author and former spy **Frederick Forsyth** writes: "... During the course of my life, I've barely escaped the wrath of an arms dealer in Hamburg, been strafed by a MiG during the Nigerian civil war and landed during a bloody coup in Guinea-Bissau. The Stasi arrested me, the Israelis regaled me, the IRA prompted a quick move from Ireland to England, and a certain attractive Czech secret police agent – well, her actions were a bit more intimate. And that's just for starters.

All of that I saw from the inside. But all that time I was, nonetheless, an outsider."



Bryan Grieg Fry is **VENOM DOC** (Hachette) and never far from danger:
"... It was in the lush Malaysian rainforest of the Cameroon Highlands that we finally came across the blue, long-glanded coral snake. We discovered it in the most incongruent manner: by zipping around a golf course in the early morning following a drenching storm the night before. This snake looked like no other. It was striped, with deep ocean blue intervening between electric blue and artery red. It was living colour that also moved like electricity. My experience counted for naught as this snake moved like it was a venom-tipped garden hose writhing from a strong jet of water.

In the thick leaf litter this animal reigned supreme. If you were a snake of any kind, you were food. It moved like it was a sea snake under water. It was at the femme fatale level of deadly beautiful."



Michael Leunig in the foreword to **HEARTLAND: CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF THE AUSTRALIAN CONSERVATION FOUNDATION** (Echo):
"... If you're wondering about the meaning of life, it's right there before you – and inside you. It's nature. It's the great beautiful common cause. Know it. Love it. Enjoy it. And do all that you reasonably can to rescue and protect it; but don't delay."





Jeff Apter charts **TRAGEDY: THE SAD BALLAD OF THE GIBB BROTHERS** (Echo):



"... As cheesy as disco now looks in pop culture's rearview mirror, *Saturday Night Fever* was a platinum-plated phenomenon, powered by the brothers' music. The Bee Gees stuttered 'you shhhhhould be dancing' and it seemed that the western world took them up on the suggestion. Wherever you looked, flares billowed and body shirts were worn open to the waist, revealing more gold than Fort Knox. Cleavage and heels ruled, hair was primped and permed. Discos popped up on every street corner from New York to Newcastle, London to Lisbon."

PHOTOS: (BEE GEES) GETTY IMAGES; (SNAKE) SESHADRI K, 2015.

MOVIE DIGEST

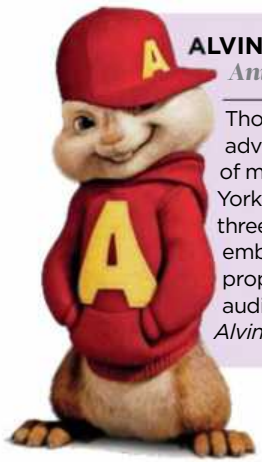


Chris Hemsworth as first mate Owen Chase



IN THE HEART OF THE SEA *Action Adventure*

Based on the true events of the New England *Essex* whaling ship disaster that partly inspired Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, this film offers a fresh perspective. In 1820, the *Essex* was struck and sunk by a mammoth-sized sperm whale. *In the Heart of the Sea* depicts the harrowing 90-day struggle the surviving crew members went through – braving storms, starvation and despair, and leading them to question the morality of their trade. Directed by the brilliant Ron Howard, with special effects that will keep you on the edge of your seat, this film is a definite for those who prefer high adventure in the safety of the cinema.



ALVIN AND THE CHIPMUNKS: THE ROAD CHIP *Animation Comedy Family*

Those cuddly chipmunks are back for another crazy, helium-filled adventure. This time Alvin, Simon and Theodore, through a string of misunderstandings, believe their "dad" Dave has gone to New York to propose to his new girlfriend and dump them. With only three days to spare to stop the proposal, they pack their bags and embark on a road trip. Will they get there in time? Or will Dave propose and bring them back a terrible stepbrother? Younger audiences will love every crazy minute of the fourth instalment of *Alvin and the Chipmunks.*



Christmas chaos: Keaton and Goodman

LOVE THE COOPERS *Comedy Drama*

This movie is so much more that the usual family Christmas comedy. *Love the Coopers* sees four generations of a dysfunctional family unite for their annual Christmas Eve celebration. Sound familiar? While the notion of surprise visitors, unexpected guests and strange confrontations turning a family gathering upside down is nothing new, the cast sets this movie apart. Diane Keaton, Ed Helms, John Goodman and Amanda Seyfried are part of an exceptional group of actors that will leave you pondering family bonds and the meaning of the holiday.

JOY *Biopic*

"Don't ever think that the world owes you something, because it doesn't."



This is the rags-to-riches story of Joy Mangano (Jennifer Lawrence, right), inventor of the self-wringing Miracle Mop. Joy is faced with loss of innocence, betrayal and treachery, and the travails of love during her climb to the top. However, her inner life and fierce imagination help her manage some seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Bradley Cooper plays the charismatic Home Shopping network executive who is very supportive of Joy's merchandise and Robert De Niro plays her father. It's the third time they put Jennifer Lawrence under the direction of David O. Russell (*Silver Linings Playbook*, *American Hustle*) and it's definitely another strong and entertaining production.



MR BEAN

***Mr Bean: The Animated Series* (Volumes 1 and 2)**

Mr Bean Funny Faces



Can you believe it's been 25 years since comedic icon Mr Bean first appeared on our television screens? Created by Rowan Atkinson, Mr Bean's hapless, much-loved, rubber-faced, slapstick style is celebrated with the special anniversary release of three new DVDs. *Mr Bean Funny Faces*, a compilation of live action and animated episodes, and *Mr Bean: The Animated Series* (Volumes 1 and 2) are bound to have you in stitches – again.

Did You Know?

- The original proposed name for the character was Mr White. Names of vegetables were next, including Mr Cauliflower, ending with the choice of Mr Bean.
- Mr Bean is based on a character originally developed by Rowan Atkinson while he was studying for his Master's degree at Oxford University.
- The shows have been screened on over 50 airlines.
- The title sequence, which sees Mr Bean drop down in a beam of light, gave viewers the impression that Mr Bean was an alien from outer space.
- There were only 14 episodes of Mr Bean made.
- Mr Bean made a brief cameo at the opening ceremony of the London Olympics in 2012.



Trivia: ***Charlie Chaplin, famous for his silly walk, insured his feet for US$150,000 in the 1920s.***

TEST YOUR GENERAL KNOWLEDGE

Trivia

1. Which two-time British prime minister, born this month in 1804, was colloquially known as Dizzy? *1 point*

2. According to the proverb, what do empty barrels make? *1 point*

3. Which European country's capital, starting with C, means "merchant's haven"? *1 point*

4. What would you be doing if you emptied a Nebuchadnezzar? *1 point*

5. What cooking method was discovered during the development of radar, and patented in 1945? *1 point*

6. Which renowned award is presented on December 10 each year, and why is that the chosen date? *2 points*

7. Which two alliterative countries border Panama? *2 points*



8. Which posthumously published Ernest Hemingway novel is the title of a 1983 hit sung by Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton? *1 point*

9. What animal's name comes from the French for "spiny pig"? *1 point*

10. Rollo and Reginald were early names before finally settling on the current moniker of which ruddy nosed icon? *1 point*

11. To the nearest 10,000 kilometres, what is the Earth's circumference? *2 points*

12. In which sport would a *nightwatchman* whose score was a *Nelson* be disappointed to hit a *dolly* off a *pie*? What would the person's final score be? *2 points*

13. Which former James Bond has a tattoo reading "Scotland Forever" on his arm? *1 point*

14. What are December's two zodiac signs? *1 point*

15-18 Gold medal **10-14 Silver medal** **5-9 Bronze medal** **0-4 Wooden spoon**

ANSWERS: 1. Benjamin Disraeli (21/12/1804–19/4/81). 2. The most noise. 3. Copenhagen. 4. Drinking champagne. 5. Microwave oven. 6. Nobel Peace Prize; anniversary of Alfred Nobel's death in 1896. 7. Costa Rica and Colombia. 8. *Islands in the Stream*. 9. Porcupine. 10. Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. 11. 40,000km. 12. Cricket; 111. 13. Sean Connery. 14. Sagittarius and Capricorn.

BY GAIL MACCALLUM; PHOTO: ISTOCK

IT PAYS TO INCREASE YOUR

Word Power

Sound It Out

Millions of people around the world celebrate Christmas this month, and from carols to masses and pantomimes, joyful music and sounds abound. So this month, a sonically inspired quiz. Answers on next page.

BY EMILY COX & HENRY RATHVON

1. raucous *adj.* – A: disagreeably harsh. B: thin and reedy. C: with no embellishment or creativity.

2. harangue *n.* – A: Irish accent. B: ranting speech. C: earnest plea.

3. overture *n.* – A: feudal warcry. B: prelude or introduction. C: high musical note.

4. mellifluously *adv.* – A: in a slurred manner. B: smoothly and sweetly. C: in muffled tones.

5. Lorelei *n.* – A: a water spirit whose song lures sailors to destruction. B: story narrator. C: opera soloist.

6. a cappella *adv.* – A: sung spontaneously. B: sung without instruments. C: sung in a syncopated rhythm.

7. repertoire *n.* – A: complete list of works, as of music. B: full range of a voice. C: tune sung in a round.

8. declaim *v.* – A: retract an oath. B: vow. C: speak pompously.

9. dissonant *adj.* – A: in counterpoint. B: teasing or mocking. C: harmonically clashing.

10. timbre *n.* – A: tonal quality. B: accent. C: introduction, as of a speech.

11. troubadour *n.* – A: town crier. B: strolling singer. C: choir director.

12. eulogise *v.* – A: lament. B: praise. C: sing a solo.

13. inflection *n.* – A: vocal rise or fall. B: catchy melody. C: repeat of a phrase.

14. scat *v.* – A: sing nonsense syllables. B: omit notes. C: speak fast.

15. soliloquy *n.* – A: glee club. B: pause in speaking. C: act of talking to oneself.

Answers

1. raucous – [A] disagreeably harsh. I awoke, as usual, to the raucous chorus of crows outside my window.

2. harangue – [B] ranting speech. One more infomercial harangue, and I'm tossing this TV off the balcony!

3. overture – [B] prelude, introduction. The recording features all four overtures that Beethoven wrote for the opera *Fidelio*.

4. mellifluously – [B] smoothly and sweetly. As expected, Lucille's aria was delivered most mellifluously.

5. Lorelei – [A] a water spirit whose song lures sailors to destruction. Many a boatman has been lured to shipwreck by a lovely Lorelei.

6. a cappella – [B] sung without instruments. Jo asked in music class, "Is it still a cappella if we use kazoos?"

7. repertoire – [A] complete list of works, as of music. The new cellist was given just two months to learn the orchestra's repertoire.

8. declaim – [C] speak pompously. The politician seized the opportunity to declaim on the limitations of his predecessor.

9. dissonant – [C] harmonically clashing. "Let's run that line again," the conductor said. "Those three notes are still a little dissonant."

10. timbre – [A] tonal quality. The most obvious differences of timbre are in those of various musical instruments.

11. troubadour – [B] strolling singer. I was followed by a troublesome troubadour at the Renaissance Faire.

12. eulogise – [B] praise. Alex was eulogised for his countless acts of philanthropy.

13. inflection – [A] vocal rise or fall. The detective could tell from the suspect's inflection that she was lying.

14. scat – [A] sing nonsense syllables. Louis Armstrong set the standard on how to scat.

15. soliloquy – [C] act of talking to oneself. Don't pester me – I'm trying to memorise Hamlet's soliloquy.

FINAL NOTES

Legend held that a dying swan would sing an especially sweet melody. Whether the folklore is true or not, ***swan song*** by extension now means any final performance or appearance: "The band's swan song at the stadium was an emotional affair for fans."

VOCABULARY RATINGS
5 & below: Strident
6–10: Dulcet
11–12: Clarion
13-15: Word Power wizard

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